

Michael V. Forrestal Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 4/8/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Forrestal (1927 - 1989), Assistant to the President for Far Eastern Affairs (1962 - 1962); senior staff member, National Security Council (1962 - 1967), discusses his recruitment to the White House, calls from JFK regarding news items in Vietnam, and Secretary of State diplomatic appointments, among other issues.

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Michael V. Forrestal – JFK #1

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First Oral History Interview

with

Michael V. Forrestal

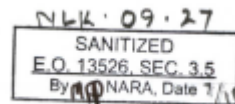
Wednesday, April 8, 1964
Washington

By Joseph Kraft

For the John F. Kennedy Library

KRAFT: It is sometimes said, Mr. Forrestal, that you are Averell Harriman's [William Averell Harriman] man on the National Security Council staff. Is that true, and can you tell me a little bit about how you came to work at the White House?

FORRESTAL: Yes, I think that is partly true, that I didn't know the President very well before I came down here; I had only known him as a social figure really. I think my parents had known his family somewhat; but he didn't know me except as a person he might have seen at gatherings in New York or in Washington. Once I did have a long talk with the President when he was still Senator in Antibes. This was at the time of the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] hearings when he was away, during the censure hearings of Senator McCarthy. He was in Europe. I think Jacky [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] was having a child, which she then failed to have (there was a miscarriage.) I think it was in the summer of 1953, if I'm not mistaken.



About that period. I lunched with him in a very informal atmosphere at Cap d'Antibes at Eden Roc. He asked me a lot about Governor Harriman then, who had decided to run for his first term as Governor of New York. And in the course of that conversation I remember asking the President a lot about the McCarthy episode. Frankly it was quite a shock to find that the President was not so violent about McCarthy as I was; but that was our first contact.

In January of 1961 after the election but before the inauguration, Averell called me, really quite out of the blue, and he said, "I need a witness because the President-elect wants to meet Hugh Gaitskell, who is coming over to New York for a brief visit and he wants to meet him quietly; and I have arranged to have a lunch at my house. But the State Department insists that there be an independent witness to this because they don't think it is proper for the President elect to have a private conversation with the leader of the British

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opposition. And apparently they don't trust me, so they have asked me to have somebody else present, and would you come do it?" Of course I said instantly I would. We had the lunch; I think it was Averell and Jack Bingham [Jonathan Brewster Bingham], Gaitskell, President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], and myself. Presumably he had asked Jack Bingham on the same basis. He had asked Jack to be a witness also. The President and Gaitskell discussed current British politics and what was going on in England at the time. The President pressed Gaitskell for his views on a great many questions. I don't remember the details. I think I was so excited by the lunch that my memory is rather bad about the precise things we discussed.

After the lunch, however, as we were leaving (there were large crowds outside the house and an awful lot of pushing and milling around. The President had a terribly tight schedule, he had to go down to the Waldorf or something immediately after lunch) - he grabbed

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me by the arm as we were walking down stairs and said in a rather loud whisper, "Mike, is there any place that we could talk privately?" Of course I got terribly excited at this thought and, not being able to think of any other place I said, "Yes, the men's room downstairs at the bottom of the stairway. " So we went down stairs and into the men's room; the President closed the door (it was a very small outer room on the ground floor) and I figured this was going to be it! I'm going to be asked to be Secretary of State - or something similar - and I knew it was coming all the time. The President, still whispering, said, "Mike, I've got a serious problem I must discuss with you. Can't you do something to get Averell a hearing aid? He just didn't seem to be following all of the conversation during lunch today." So I muttered that I would do my best and the President could have walked out. Just as he stepped out the front door in front of the photographers and everybody he said, "And by the way, when are

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you coming down?" And I said, "Mr. President, I don't plan really to come down, although I would like very much to. I've just been made a partner in my law firm, and I can't leave that

soon. But maybe a year from now - could I have a rain check?" And he said, "Sure, sure." And he got in the car and left.

I heard nothing more about working in Washington. I stayed in New York and practised law. Then almost to the day - I think it literally was to the day - (it was in early January 1962) I got a call from Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] who said the President wanted to talk to me. And he just got on the phone and he said, "Well, it's been a year now. It is time for you to come down. When can we expect you?" I said, "To do what, Mr. President?" He said, "That's not important. Just get down here. Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] will call; he'll have all the information. "

So I came down a week or so later; talked to Mac, and I asked Mac what I was supposed to do. Mac had Carl Kaysen in the

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office at the same time. We just sat down and Mac introduced me to Carl. I asked him what I was supposed to do, and he said, "Well, you're supposed to be a kind of an ambassador to that separate sovereignty known as Averell Harriman." Harriman had just been made Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East. Prior to that time Averell had spent a year as a roving Ambassador and then our chief Delegate to the Conference on Laos.

KRAFT: So this was right after Thanksgiving in '61.

FORRESTAL: Well, this would actually have been in January of '62. Averell had come back and he already was Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East. Then Mac explained, "Governor Harriman is a very important fellow, and we want to be sure that he has a man here we can rely on. Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] used to be in charge of the Far East on this staff. He moved over to State Department." I think he was saying that to make me feel more excited about coming

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down here. I was playing a little hard to get at that particular time. But he said, "Generally you will be working in the Far East. " So I said I had to go back up to the law firm and consider it. Mac is very smart about these things, and he got the President (I assume he did) to write a letter to the law firm asking them to encourage me to come down. I then resigned from the firm altogether and came.

KRAFT: You didn't talk to the President or Harriman at this time?

FORRESTAL: No, neither of them. I suppose I should have, but I didn't. I was sort of excited about the whole thing. I just decided to do it. But I quit and came down in the middle of February to report for work.

The day I got down here, I came down in the morning. Mac said, "I think you better see the President." He took me up to see the President. The President said "hello" and that he

felt happy that I was coming on board. I said, "Mac tells me that you want me to work in the Far East, but I want you to know one thing before taking this job.

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I don't know anything at all about the Far East. I've never studied it; I've never been there. I know a little bit about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from past government service, but nothing at all about the Far East." The President said, "That's fine. That's just what we want. Somebody without preconceptions and prejudices;" and having said that, he suddenly looked at my tie and said, "Ah, you're wearing a Brook tie, aren't you?" I felt instantly on the defensive. This is the wrong sort of thing to wear with President Kennedy. This made me out to be something - not a Democrat - illiberal and a reactionary. Of course it didn't occur to me to ask myself or him how he knew until later, when I got out of the office. I rushed back and looked it up to find out whether the awful truth was true. It turned out that he was also a member of this same neo-fascist organization. Probably he had joined it years ago, but he remembered that. And that was really all I saw of him for about three weeks, because

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the next day Mac told me that I was going to go out to Laos with Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan]. But that was really how we got started. That was the first impression of the President, which I may say was very frightening. He frightened me.

KRAFT: Why?

FORRESTAL: Well, he was abrupt among other things. He was very business-like, rather quick. He had that sort of instant charm, but it lasted only for a matter of seconds.

KRAFT: Preoccupied with other things?

FORRESTAL: Not really. No. He was alone in the office. And he got up and he walked over. We didn't sit down or anything. We stayed standing. But you had the feeling you were reporting and you made your little report, "Here I am", and he told you what he wanted you to do, and that was about the end of it. Then he thought of an amusing way to get you out of the office. And that was to ask you about the tie you were wearing. But I do remember quite clearly walking out of the room backwards,

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because it was an impressive place, and it was an impressive man; and you sort of had the feeling that you had to keep face to the light and bow out.

KRAFT: Did you go right off on that trip?

FORRESTAL: Almost immediately, yes. I think it was the following day.

KRAFT: You went right off to...?

FORRESTAL: I went right off to Laos for about three weeks.

KRAFT: And you had no other interviews besides the President and that first talk with Bundy?

FORRESTAL: That was it. I did talk to Averell for, I think, maybe an hour before leaving.

KRAFT: What was that about?

FORRESTAL: About the purpose of the trip.

KRAFT: Which was?

FORRESTAL: It was to go out and try to persuade General Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan],

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who was the chief of the Right Wing forces. In those days he was in effect the leader of the Government in Vientiane - and I was to try to persuade him to accept the idea of a coalition government, headed by Souvanna Phouma.

KRAFT: I think that's a subject we ought to be getting into.

FORRESTAL: I think that would be another round. Yes.

KRAFT: Can you give me some description of the regular routine of your office. Who you work with in the State Department. Who you work with in the CIA if you have any contacts with them. Who you work with in the Defense Department and how you worked with the President and with Bundy.

FORRESTAL: Yes, I think so. We had to begin with on Bundy's staff, men who had responsibilities for regions, of which I was one. Carl Kaysen, in those days, worried about Africa as well as other things. Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] wasn't exactly on Bundy's staff, but for this purpose

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he was. He had Latin America and the AID program. I had the Far East, and Bob Komer [Robert W. Komer] had the Near East and South Asia. Dave Klein worked on Europe as

Bundy's assistant. Bundy himself mostly did Europe. And I think each of us worked in more or less the same way. Our first job of course was to get on as good terms as we could with the Assistant Secretary of State for the region. Well that was no particular trouble in my case. But then you also had to get to know his staff and that took some time. The Assistant Secretary's staff. First of all, they're quite big. I think there were some 300 officers in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. I never got to know them all, but I got to know the ones who were important, and that were more or less reliable and helpful.

KRAFT: Who were they?

FORRESTAL: He then had as his deputy, a remarkable older man, who is now the Consul General in Hong Kong called Ed Rice [Edward E. Rice]. The principal

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people that I worked with then were Ed, Bill Sullivan, who had been Harriman's deputy in the Geneva Conference. He was actually the United Nations advisor in the Far Eastern Bureau, but he never did anything on the United Nations. He worked almost entirely on Laos as sort of a special assistant to Harriman. And a fellow called Chuck Cross [Charles T. Cross], who was the Lao Desk Officer. And Barney Koren, who was the Chief of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs. Then on Vietnam things, there was a fellow called Sterling Cottrell, who ran the Task Force and Ben Wood, who was his assistant. We didn't have much on China, either Mainland or Taiwan, at least in those days we didn't. Those I'd say were the people I saw most of in the Department of State. On the CIA side, Des Fitzgerald [Desmond Fitzgerald] was the fellow in charge of Asia Region, and I dealt mostly with him. I didn't get much below Des. In Defense, Bill Bundy [William P. Bundy] was Paul Nitze's [Paul Henry Nitze] deputy, a fellow we saw a lot of. And then a guy called Admiral Heinz, "Pickles" Heinz [Luther C. Heinz], who has since left. But he ran the Asian part of ISA. Oh, of course,

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on JCS, Brute Krulak [Victor H. Krulak], Marine Major General, was Lemnitzer's [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] representative, as well as being Gilpatric's [Roswell L. Gilpatric] representative on anything that had to do with small wars - counter insurgency. That's about it.

KRAFT: Those were your opposite numbers?

FORRESTAL: Yes.

KRAFT: And how did you work with the President on a day-to-day basis and with Bundy? Did you have regular staff meetings?

FORRESTAL: Yes, Bundy had, in those days, a morning staff meeting every morning. And we would have not only the people I have just named, who were regional people, people that were on his own staff who were charged with substantive responsibilities, but also to those meetings would come Maxwell Taylor's [Maxwell D. Taylor] representative. Taylor was then Military Advisor to the President. It was Col. Bill Smith later, but before that it was a fellow called Col. Legere. And Ken Hansen

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from the Bureau of the Budget. Don Wilson from USIA. And Ralph of course came; and Art Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.]. And that was about our staff. At those meetings Mac would usually have a list of problems that were coming up during the day.

Some of them were things that the President had asked him to get done and he would parcel out those jobs. Some of the things were thoughts that he had himself (things that we should be anticipating or working on); and then of course lastly there were the reports or the worries that each one of us had which we wanted to get the whole group to discuss or bring to Mac's attention. I don't think the staff meetings were, quite frankly, or are today an immensely valuable exercise, for many reasons - partly because we had representatives of outside agencies. CIA also had a man on staff, and of course the military were there; so we didn't have quite the free and easy discussions that we would have if it were a strictly a White House staff. Also not everybody is interested in everybody's

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problems. So you had a stuffy kind of conversation sometimes. I used to dislike them because they came at 9 o'clock in the mornings. Mac is brilliant at 9 o'clock in the morning, as very few other people can be - certainly not me. And I would sometimes grumble about the fact that we had to sit there, instead of reading one's mail and getting on with the cable traffic. Basically, they came down to a kind of dialogue between Carl Kaysen and Mac, both of whom had known each other for years. They enjoyed intellectual games with each other at staff meeting. But after a staff meeting we would go back to our respective offices and typical of the kind of thing that would happen then is that Harriman would call me in a dudgeon about something, say that General Phoumi had done something in Vientiane that was absolutely terrible, and he was having an argument with somebody else in the State Department or in the CIA or the Defense Department, and it was absolutely essential that the President

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back him up. If it was a serious thing, I would go up to see Mrs. Lincoln. This is one of the difficult things that anybody in the White House has to eventually find out how to do, and that is how to gain access to the President. When I first got down here, of course, it was a rather frightening process. No one can tell you how to do this. Indeed, people tend not to tell you how, because they don't want to have competition for that access. But I found out after I reconnoitered the place a little bit that two doors were always open: Kenny O'Donnell's [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] door and Mrs. Lincoln's door, and they are right beside the President's

office. I first went in to see Kenny once, because I assumed that was the right way to do it and stated my problem to him and got an intensely cold reception. He sort of made me feel that I had a nerve raising any sort of foreign issue, since there were twelve Congressmen and six Senators and other people who were much more useful for the President to see than I. A day

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or two later I went back to the attack, and I found that Mrs. Lincoln's door was also open on the other side. Besides, Mrs. Lincoln had a hole drilled through her door so that you could see what people the President had in with him. But above all, Mrs. Lincoln was the kind of person who seemed happy to have you come up. At least she gave that impression right at the outset. And after a couple of times of going up and talking with Mrs. Lincoln, she said, "Well, now why don't you just walk into the President's office?" I did this once or twice, and very quickly found out that was indeed the way to see the President. You just broke in knowing of course that when you did get in to see him, you had to be terribly quick and very much to the point; otherwise, he could make you feel that you were a terrible waste of time and weren't doing your own job very well.

KRAFT: How would he do that?

FORRESTAL: Well, first of all - after a while when I began coming in I could sense immediately that I was not bringing good news as far

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as he was concerned. Whenever I loomed in the doorway a slightly pained expression would cross his face; and he leaned back in his chair, and he would say the sort of things like, "What bad news do you have from Laos today, Mike?" Or he would just sit there and say nothing. That gets you instantly nervous; and I tried to state my case as quickly and as concisely as possible. He would ask a few questions. Sometimes he would ask me to go and check with somebody else or do something more, but very often he would say, "Alright, fine." He very rarely said, "Yes, I agree with you entirely. Go out and do it." You were almost always left with, "Well, I told the President. I'm not quite sure that he has really reacted. But he hasn't objected to what I've told him I'm going to do. And that was about as much as you needed in most cases.

KRAFT: Would it be fair to say that you have just now outlined two of the decisive functions of White House staff people - the first

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one earlier when you indicated that the important thing was to know which item to go to the President with?

FORRESTAL: Yes. There were really two functions that we performed. One was, just as you say, what things have happened in the last 24 - 48 hours that the President ought to know about, and you felt you had a strong duty to keep him informed. Of course you also knew he was finding out these things from other means, so the motive for doing this was to make him feel you weren't falling behind the news, and to make sure that he got it all - or at least that he got the kind of opinion you wanted him to get from the Departments and from the people within the Departments. The other function is, of course, to carry out whatever orders he gave. So the dual thing - getting information to him and getting the decisions back out into the Departments. And following them up.

KRAFT: Were there other ways you got information besides being initiated by a call from Harriman?

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FORRESTAL: Oh yes.

KRAFT: You yourself were reading all the cables.

FORRESTAL: Yes. This actually was the most burdensome part of the whole job. Every cable, every intelligence report, every letter from any of our stations in the area for which I was responsible theoretically came across my desk. I once weighed during one week the amount - it's about 7 pounds of paper a day; and it's very hard to keep up with it. You learn after awhile how to skim and to read quickly. You are astride the whole government stream of communication. Then, of course, I learned (it took me a long time to learn this) that the daily newspapers are really quite a different source of information. First of all they are quicker, faster, and very often the newspaper reporter in a foreign country, particularly the Far East, will latch on to a particular bit of news before we get it and write it up in such a way as to make it appear much more important than you would think it was when it came through the ordinary government

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communications system. Well, the President didn't read most of these cables that I read, but he did read heaven knows how many newspapers. And quite carefully - and he read them very early in the morning. And if he were moved enough, he would call you about it to ask why it happened, usually putting the burden on you to explain why it had happened and why you hadn't told him in advance it was going to happen, or hadn't cleared the particular thing with him.

KRAFT: Did you generally read the cables before the staff meeting or afterwards?

FORRESTAL: Well, in my area of the world they have exactly a twelve-hour difference between Bangkok, say, and Washington. I get about half of them before the staff meeting and the other half would dribble in during the rest of the day.

KRAFT: Did you ever rely on saying your piece at staff meeting and then having Bundy carry the news to the President?

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FORRESTAL: Yes. As a matter of fact, that was by far the easiest and most normal thing to do. Bundy (who had much more experience than I at this sort of thing) was very often able to pick up most of the important stuff that had come into the White House situation room that morning, and he would say, "Well, what about this cable just in from Bangkok?" And you, having read it (hopefully) you would give him your views. And I would say that 9/10ths of the routine sort of thing Bundy compressed into a number of things and he would go up, usually right after the staff meeting, before the President's appointment schedule really got going (the President didn't usually have appointments before 10 o'clock in the morning), but he got to the office about 9 o'clock. So there was an hour (or perhaps half an hour) during which Bundy could just rattle off the major points that he had for the day. It was only when you had a complicated matter that required a decision or at least a matter on which you wanted to prepare the President in

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advance of his having to make a decision that, in consultation with Bundy, Bundy would decide after talking to me whether he would do it himself or he and I would both do it, or if I would go up alone. Of course it took quite a while before I got to go all by myself into the President's office whenever I wanted to. That took about six months to achieve.

KRAFT: We've covered a lot of ground, and I'd like to fill in some details. Can you remember any specific occasions when the President would call about a news item?

FORRESTAL: I remember a bad one. Yes. There were lots, but there was one which he was particularly exercised about, and which I rather felt was a failure on my part. An article appeared in the NEW YORK TIMES - on the 17th page of the NEW YORK TIMES. It was from Saigon I think. It was one of those articles that unless you read the paper awfully carefully you would have missed it entirely, because in the body of it, it was describing what had happened over the past few

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days, in Saigon, and in the middle of it there was a paragraph that said that the Vietnamese Government had asked for \$10 million cash grant in order to provide enough piasters for their

budget. We were going to buy piasters from the Vietnamese to finance the war in the provinces. This money was to be used for agreed projects. I was too new at the game to have realized that there apparently had been an argument between the Aid agency and the Vietnamese Government, in which the President apparently had expressed an opinion. He rather felt that we shouldn't be doling out dollars to buy people's currency, especially when the gold reserves of the Vietnamese Government were very high. But he called me about that quite early one morning. I said I didn't have the information, but that I'd get it right away. I prepared a memorandum for him that same morning and got it up to Evelyn Lincoln. And what I found out basically was that, yes, there had been these discussions back and forth, but probably the Aid agency

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would not recommend our going ahead with it. Three days later there was an article, this time on the front page of the NEW YORK TIMES, headlines: United States Makes Cash Grant to South Vietnam of an Additional 10 Million Dollars in Order to Finance the War. And unfortunately I hadn't seen that before the telephone rang. The President called at seven - seven fifteen I guess. And I hadn't gotten to the NEW YORK TIMES at seven fifteen.

KRAFT: You were at home?

FORRESTAL: I was at home, yes. He didn't know whether I was at home or not. The operators just put the call through. And he just blew up. "First of all," he said, "I don't think you've given me very accurate information when you told me on Wednesday the Aid agency would recommend to me probably that they should not make this thing. I read now that they have already gone ahead and done it. Who did it? Find out who did it. Really dig in, Mike. You didn't dig in far enough

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obviously. Something is wrong. Find out why it went wrong, and let's see if we can't reverse it. I think it's a shocking thing. Here we are losing gold anyway. Those people have much too much money anyway. Why are we having to pay out these dollars to buy their currency? It doesn't make any sense to me at all." Well, that's the kind of thing that happened. There were other occasions too. That was one of the worst.

KRAFT: Was it mainly on news accounts, news developments, that he was pressing on?

FORRESTAL: Yes, it was the press. He would also call about things he caught in the intelligence bulletin. This was another constant problem we had. The one line of information that we did not see, and this was intentionally done this way, the President himself had arranged this. He got an intelligence check list every morning that was prepared by CIA, quite outside any other intelligence. And the purpose of this was to

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give the President an up to date appraisal of an independent group in the intelligence community. This came after the Bay of Pigs. And you can imagine why it was done. It was to insure that the President got information from a group of people who had absolutely nothing to do with operations of any sort whether they were overt or covert, and give him an estimate of what was happening in the world. Well, we could see this, but because it was delivered and then shown to him in a matter of minutes, usually we were always late. And he would call us up and say, "I've just read in my checklist that such and such has happened. What about it?" Well, sometimes the people that wrote that just had a different view from the people that wrote the normal intelligence; and you were very often in the unpleasant position of having to explain or find out and then explain to him why there was a difference between what we had been told and what he had been told in his checklist.

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KRAFT: Was there anything like what you would call a "party line" faction within Bundy's staff?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Well, Carl Kaysen had a very strong line of his own affecting economic affairs. And a lot of other things too. Carl is an economist who fundamentally questions what you might call the banking attitude towards economics. This would show up for example: it would have been Carl who would have stimulated the President to have gotten angry about the \$10 million piaster purchase. I don't think I would have. First of all, the amount wasn't all that great; and secondly, a good case could have been made on the other side. They did need this money. He also had strong views on devices and means to take care of the international liquidity problem. Remember there was a problem of general shortage of foreign exchange and reserves worldwide. He thought that was an artificial situation that was entirely correctable by various devices: pooling reserves, setting up

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of special international institutions whose job it would be to make available to countries which needed them, mixed bags of foreign currency - any number of devices. And he fought a rather continuous battle with the Treasury Department, who took quite the opposite view that you mustn't change any of the normal banking regular systems for taking care of these things because if you did, you might start a run against the dollar.

Bob Komer had very strong views about politically underdeveloped areas. The United States was a big, powerful country and shouldn't beat up little countries; that you got much further in the long run by adapting to the changes in the world, rather than trying to resist them. And in his opinion the changes that were going to take place soonest were going to be in that uncommitted third area of the world. I think Carl and Bob were the two strongest men on Bundy's staff. They had the strongest views. The President by no means went

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along with them all the time; but I think he enjoyed having this kind of person around.

KRAFT: Was there any regular function that you had that we haven't described? For example, did you have a role in messages that were sent out? Did you have a role in budgetary matters?

FORRESTAL: Well, you mean in legislative messages?

KRAFT: Legislative messages or Chief of State messages back and forth or visits?

FORRESTAL: Yes. As a matter of fact that in a way is the most time-consuming job we had - each of us. We drafted in most cases every Presidential communication with a foreign Head of State or a foreign Head of Government in our area. We also initiated a great many telegrams from the Department of State and the Department of Defense, not necessarily Presidential ones; and in fact (it's hard to put numbers on these things, but certainly in crisis areas) if one of

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us didn't actually write the telegram the department sent out, we were certainly there when it was born. This actually was a way of avoiding having an argument between the President and the Department of State. If the Department got some sense of what the President wanted or what his ideas were, at the lowest level, then you could get a better message, which was better than having an argument when it got to the top.

We also were responsible for visits. Whenever the Ambassador or an official from a country from one of our regions came to see the President, we had to see to it first that he got an appointment, make sure that the Department arranged to get him to the White House at the right time; and then whenever the President met with him in his office, a staff member was always there taking notes. Of course the State Department normally also had a man there taking notes for the Department, which subsequently became the notes for the memorandum of conversation. Our job is really to take internal notes for

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the President's own files, but mostly to take down any promises the President made or directions that had been given and then to be sure they got carried out.

KRAFT: How about visits - were there any visits from foreign Heads of State or Foreign Ministers in your area?

FORRESTAL: Oh, yes. I suppose 50 or 60. They happened very often. I haven't looked up the statistics - I'm sure somebody has; but it seems to me that President Kennedy did a lot more of that, especially in the kind of countries that I was interested in, than would normally have been the case with any other President.

KRAFT: Do you have any recollection...did you sit in on any of those meetings ?

FORRESTAL: Oh, yes. All of them in my area.

KRAFT: Do you have any recollection of some of them? Was Sukarno over when you were there?

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FORRESTAL: Unfortunately he wasn't. He had come the year before; but I think the major ones that I saw were, of course, Souvanna Phouma, the King of Laos, the President of the Philippines, and Menzies [Robert Gordon Menzies] (several times). Prime Minister Menzies seems to love to come to Washington – every time he goes to London; and he is a wonderful person. President Kennedy seemed to like him very much. They had some long conversations. New Zealand's Holyoake [Keith Jacka Holyoake]. Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] never came (from Vietnam); Sarit [Sarit Thanarat] never came - he was from Bangkok - but their Foreign Ministers used to come occasionally. Who else did we have from that part of the world? Ikeda [Ikeda Hayato] and Yoshida [Shigeru Yoshida] from Japan.

KRAFT: What were the kinds of things you used to have to do for them? Were there memoranda prepared for the President?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Normally the State Department would prepare a briefing book. We had lots of trouble with those, because they were great big thick black books, which were very useful because they

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contained a lot of biographical information and background stuff; but there was almost more than you needed and the President used to complain that they didn't always contain the information he really wanted to know - for example, where did this man go to school; was he very bright in his school or not so bright? What were his hobbies; what were the things he was most interested in quite outside his government position? And then, of course, they contained suggestions for points the President could cover and also guesses as to what the foreign officials might cover. These in the early days weren't too well prepared; and one of our jobs was to do a cover memorandum. Actually we take bits and pieces out of our copy of the book and then send him a little short memorandum with an attachment, so that he could either look at that if he was in a hurry, or look at that and the big book if he had more time. One had more of

a sense of what it really was he wanted to talk about

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with these people than the desk officer did in the Department of State.

KRAFT: Did these meetings in general go well with business accomplished, or were they mostly ceremonial?

FORRESTAL: Mostly ceremonial, except on occasions where he had something he wanted to get across himself. The ones with Menzies were business. We had some difficulties on Indonesia with Menzies. Pelaez [Emmanuel Pelaez] came at exactly the time of the Philippine War Claims problem in the Congress. Occasionally he would take up substantive matters; but mostly it was really a chance for the President to get across to the man he was talking to that he did honestly care about Laos, did care about Cambodia; and not only did he care, but he knew something about them - very impressive to an Asian, or for that matter, to anybody.

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KRAFT: Did the President ever give you a general philosophic outline and indication of where he wanted to go in the Far East?

FORRESTAL: No. Not in any one conversation. Actually he was very careful never to do that with any of us. I think perhaps with Mac he may have had some hair-down conversations. Six o'clock in the evenings was the time we could best get to see him. Well, first of all he had no visitors usually then, and his office doors were actually open; and if you could beat the other sprinters we had around the White House, you could get in. You stood around if there were other people waiting until they finished their business, or waiting until the President said, "What have you got?" and talk. He was quite relaxed at this time of evening, and he would sometimes say, "Well, Mike, what for God's sake are we going to do with General Phoumi? This fellow has been

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absolutely impossible. What is really bugging him? What can we do to unbug him?" Then he would sometimes take off and say, "Now, if we could only get these people to (in the case of Laos) realize that the United States is not dead set on supporting one faction against another, that our interests out there really are - we couldn't care less actually. We would like to see them independent. We would like to see them be themselves - and not be Chinese or be French or be British or be U.S. How can we get that thought across?" In that area of the world his main theme was: the more they are themselves, the better for the United States. Let's not try to tell them what to do, and how to behave in each case. Let's stimulate them to be more themselves. But he didn't philosophize at great length. He would sometimes be humorous, express irritation and worry, but not lengthy philosophy.

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KRAFT: How about National Security Council meetings? Were there many of those and did you have any role in those?

FORRESTAL: No. There weren't very many of them, and actually the Security Council staff never went to them. The President was conscious that there was a statute that set up the National Security Council; and I think largely to comply with that statute and avoid the impression that he was completely dismantling the statutory machinery (which I don't think he wanted to do anyway), once a month he would have a National Security Council meeting - more or less - unless there was other pressing business that prevented it. At those meetings there would be a report from Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] on what was going to happen to the Chinese Representation issue in the UN. Or prospects for the next General Assembly meeting; or you'd get a report from Luther Hodges on Gold Flow (Dillon). But they were formal presentations. As I say,

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I never went to one. Bromley Smith [Bromley K. Smith] and Mac Bundy are the only two people who went: Bromley to take notes and Mac because he was the President's advisor on these matters. But so far as I am aware, no hard decision was ever taken in the formal National Security Council meetings.

KRAFT: Did you organize other meetings at various times on difficult problems?

FORRESTAL: Yes. This is vital - I'm sorry I missed it. The President's technique in arriving at a decision (a government decision) or of getting a consensus from his major officers was perhaps the most unusual and characteristic thing of his Administration. And his staff was an essential part of this. Only the very small details of Far Eastern policy - or any other policy for that matter - were actually taken care of by having a person like myself or even Mac talk to the President and then go back to the Department. By and

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large, those things were little things - questions of tactics, technique. The President was in a sense a desk officer, and he liked to have a touch and a feel for these things. But whenever any decisions came up of even medium importance, it was our job first of all to check with Mac, and if Mac agreed, you would call Kenny and say, "Kenny, the President ought to meet on Vietnam, and I think Thursday next will be a good time. " And Kenny, on something like that, would look at his calendar and say, "Four o'clock. " Then your job was to see to it that the people who could contribute the most to the President's knowledge, and the people whose acquiescence and consent as a political matter was necessary to that particular decision - they

all came into the Cabinet Room at four o'clock with a reasonable idea of what was going to be discussed. Now we weren't always able to perform the latter function, but you certainly made sure that they got there and that they knew what the

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subject was. If you had any idea of which way the President's mind was working, you tried to give them that so they came as well informed as possible. The decision as to who should come to the meeting was left almost entirely to the Bundy staff officer. However, you had to negotiate it, because everybody's ego was involved with the various departments. In a case like Vietnam, a typical group would be Secretary of State, or Ball [George W. Ball] - one or the other; Harriman when he was Assistant Secretary, and Hilsman [Roger Hilsman]. Sometimes not Hilsman always, because Harriman and Hilsman thought alike, and the idea was not to get too many people. If you had Hilsman, you had to have his counterparts all the way around the Government. So sometimes you didn't have him, sometimes you did. John McCone [John A. McCone] or Des Fitzgerald or Colby [William Egan Colby] (who took Des's place). And then I learned very quickly that you had to have a man from the Joint Chiefs, usually General Taylor or his deputy.

KRAFT: How did you learn that?

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FORRESTAL: I found that - you never learn it by calling Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] or Bill Bundy, because they would always tell you it wasn't necessary to have the Joint Chiefs; but after you had had a couple of meetings without the Joint Chiefs, the noise level got too intense afterwards. I mean the repercussions of discussing matters made involving possible military consequences (and they were right on this I'm not arguing.)

KRAFT: How did they make this noise? Did they call up and complain?

FORRESTAL: Oh, yes. This was always a delicate problem. The Defense Department (civilians) took the position that they represented the Department of Defense - all of it, uniformed as well as civilian; that where there was a military matter or military question involved, they would refer it to the Joint Chiefs, or ask the Joint Chiefs to come. The Joint Chiefs, on the other hand, held that by statute they are advisors to the President on military matters. And although this didn't come up too often when General Taylor was around

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because he sensed how to handle this, when he left and went into the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then we went back to the old problem of the civilians and the military in the Defense Department sort of having to adjust their relationships one to the other.

Before such a meeting, I would try to write a memorandum to the President describing what the problem was, what positions I thought each Department would take, analyzing these positions, and then - because he wanted it - at the very end of it say what I thought about it. But it was essential that you got everybody's position and fairly presented, not unfairly or sort of twisted. The President could see right away if you had loaded the dice one way or the other. He would usually mention it to you afterwards if you had.

KRAFT: Did you have a role of any kind in appointments, for example, diplomatic appointments?

FORRESTAL: No. Very little. Ralph Dungan, among many other things that he did, was the principal executor of that. Of course

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I used to talk to Ralph a lot about them and Ralph consulted - he would ask what we thought. But I would say that less than one time in ten was our view actually accepted. There were two things about that, first of all there were politics and secondly, there was the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State habitually considered the appointment of Ambassadors something very private between him and the President; and we did not really get into it. Occasionally the President would ask one of us what we thought. But on things like that he didn't — he took our advice less often.

KRAFT: Was there anything you can particularly single out as Secretary's appointments, for example?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Ambassador Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] was one. I'm trying to think of others.

KRAFT: The Taiwan —

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FORRESTAL: No, that was Averell Harriman's. Alan Kirk went to Taiwan first. And that was actually my suggestion to Averell, which he very quickly picked up, because he liked Admiral Kirk very much and had worked with him before. Then Jerry Wright, and that was also Averell's appointment. Ken Young [Kenneth T. Young] in Bangkok was put in before I got here, and I think that was probably a Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] appointment. His successor, Graham Martin, was probably the Secretary's, but I don't know that for sure.

KRAFT: This wasn't a matter of main concern to you though?

FORRESTAL: No. Well, we were concerned, that is to say we had strong views, but it was made fairly clear to you that this was a matter over which you at best had one opinion among many. And Mac never tried to assert control over that. If you complained to Mac very loudly that the wrong Ambassador was about to be appointed, as I did on one or two occasions, then he would say,

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"Let's go to the President to make a complaint."

KRAFT: Did you ever go?

FORRESTAL: Only once.

KRAFT: When was that?

FORRESTAL: On Ambassador Lodge.

KRAFT: What happened?

FORRESTAL: Well, this was late one afternoon. I had just found out that Ambassador Lodge was going to be appointed that very afternoon. Prior to that time Roger Hilsman and I, and I think Averell, had discussed a number of people, among them Ed Gullion [Edmund A. Gullion]. (I can't think whom else we had; we had a list of several.) Anyway, there had been a long delay in making this decision, and time was rapidly running out. Fritz Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] had said he wanted to come home anyway, and the President was quite agreeable to his coming home. So was Averell. But we hadn't gotten around

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to appointing another Ambassador. I had heard that Lodge was interested in doing this. He had told several people including the Secretary of State he wanted a job and Saigon was something he felt particularly competent to do. My own feeling was that Lodge was about the worst. One of our difficulties with Fritz Nolting was that he had gotten very wedded to the regime. He had become an apologist, really, for President Diem. A hell of a good Ambassador, but just stuck on President Diem and the more difficulties Diem raised, the more rigid Fritz Nolting became.

I was afraid that Lodge, whom I didn't know very well except as a politician, would first of all tend to take the same view that Fritz took, that after all repression is necessary in a civil war, and we mustn't discourage Diem from adopting whatever measures he thinks are required in this sort of emergency situation. If he wants to lock up a lot of people in jail and torture

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them, he is in a better position to judge whether that is necessary than we are. I was afraid that would be Lodge's view. It turned out I was wrong of course, but I felt that very strongly. I also was worried that Vietnam was going to be a tough enough problem in international affairs without having it become a domestic political issue. I was afraid that putting a Republican, particularly a Republican like Lodge, in the job would become an enormous temptation to Lodge to quit as soon as possible after he had gotten out there on the grounds that the Administration was not doing what he wanted them to do. Those were my two thoughts, so that afternoon after I had heard about this, that the nomination was going forward that way to the White House, I went to see Mac, and he half agreed. I don't think he felt as strongly as I did about it. That afternoon at 6 o'clock we went up as usual, and I think I remember seeing Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk] leaving the President's office,

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but I'm not sure about this. Anyway, we went into the President's office. Actually it was Mrs. Lincoln's office - he was sitting on the edge of Mrs. Lincoln's desk dictating. He looked up and in hindsight I think he looked as though he had just swallowed a canary, but he began talking about Vietnam in general. Suddenly he turned to Mac and said, "What do you think about Lodge as Ambassador for Vietnam?" And Mac said, "Well, I don't think it's a very good idea, Mr. President, but Mike here feels even more strongly than I do. Why don't you let him talk?" So I did and I told the President what the objections were. His eyes sort of clouded over and he didn't say anything. He changed the subject and talked about something else, and then went out. I went out into the hall and ran into Ralph Dungan, who told me even before I had a chance to say anything. He said, "Well, Lodge is the new Ambassador to Saigon." And I said, "What? We were just

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talking to the President about it." He said, "Well, the reason I know is that the Secretary of State just came out of the President's office before you came in, and he said to me, 'Ralph, you fellows don't decide everything over here' and walked on. "

KRAFT: You played some role in the social life of the White House - went to a lot of parties and things like that. Was there a complete split between your social and business life there, or were those mixed up?

FORRESTAL: No. There was a complete split, and I am virtually certain it didn't have anything to do with President Kennedy, or very little. Normally nobody on the staff except Mac and Arthur (I think those were the only two) went to the kind of social sort of things I think you are talking about. Dances and private parties. I never, actually ever, went to a lunch or a dinner with the President at which there were less than say thirty people, so I

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never had a sort of intimate party with them. But I did go to the social things. And I think that was largely because of Jacky, whom I had known before. When I did go, of course, the President was at his most amusing, because he was very relaxed there and he liked to tease people a lot, especially on his staff; and he liked also to pin labels or names on people. If he would see me across the room he would say in a very loud voice, "Come over here and tell me all about Laos now and how bad it is." Then he would turn to the person he was talking to and say, "That's Forrestal over there. He's responsible for everything that's gone wrong in Laos, " or Vietnam or Cambodia as the case might be. More people came to those because they were not associated with the Government than those who were.

KRAFT: What was the role of the Attorney General? Did he get into your area very much?

FORRESTAL: Oh, yes. Here again there were two kinds of decision meetings. On a medium decision we by and large had the experts, the desk officer right after the Secretary of State, if the desk officer had some information we thought was important that the President have or have available. But on certain decisions - major ones - such as how to behave in the summer of last year when President Diem was in difficulty, the decisions on all the Cuban things, on the early Laos problem when the Communists were attacking and pushed all the way to the Mekong River there you would have not only the experts but certain other members of the Government. The Attorney General always, very often Douglas Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], and of course John McCone was always there anyway. Murrow, but if he wasn't available, Wilson. I guess those were the major people outside the experts or people who were immediately responsible.

KRAFT: Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen]?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Well, of course, on the White House staff you would

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have Sorensen and very often Pierre [Pierre E.G. Salinger]. Not Arthur usually. General Clifton [Chester V. Clifton, Jr.], Bromley. But those were the nearest things you got to what the NSC was supposed to be. The difficulty with the NSC was that it had people on it that had very little relevant knowledge - the Director of Civil Defense for example. He did come to all the Cuban meetings. But the President didn't feel comfortable in the NSC-type of meeting because usually these men also brought their staff aides, and you have about 60 people in the room. He wanted to have meetings he could control.

But the Attorney General and Doug Dillon were the two I remember most of the outsiders who were brought at times of great crisis.

KRAFT: Did you have any rapport with the President on hobbies? I think you once mentioned to me that you were trying to organize something in connection with some ships at the Worlds Fair. Will you tell me about that?

FORRESTAL: Yes. This was the only thing like that I ever did. It was immensely successful. Some friends of mine in New York two years

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ago had the idea of making one last effort to bring all of the remaining square-rigged sailing ships together in New York Harbor this summer; and in order to do this, of course, they wanted to have President Kennedy's backing. They also wanted the backing of the Government. It meant inviting 23 or 24 countries to send their ships. I made a memorandum of this because I was a little bit ashamed at that time (or frightened) to walk in cold on the President with something of this sort; and put it in his week-end reading. (We had a system of varying priorities of boxes we could put things in which the President could read.) I put it in his week-end reading, trying to pick the perfect week-end. He was going down to Palm Beach, and there weren't so many people around down there. So I put it in, and nothing happened, nothing happened. Finally a week or so went by, and I went to see Mrs. Lincoln about it, and asked whether she had ever gotten this memorandum back. She was the channel through whom you recovered

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lost papers that had gone into the President's boxes. She said she couldn't remember it but she'd find out. Another week went by. I reminded Mrs. Lincoln about this, and she said, "Well, I've asked the President about that, and he doesn't remember where he put the memorandum but he does remember having read it and having written something on it. But he didn't tell me what he wrote on it. I think you had better see him." So I went in that afternoon, and I had to explain the thing all over again to him. I think he remembered all the time, but what he wanted was to have me come in and convince him that this was the right thing to do. Well, it didn't take very much convincing. He got quite excited about it. He said yes, he would do it, and furthermore that he would actually go to New York. The more he talked, the more interested and excited he got. And then he said, "Why can't we have it on July 4th in front of the Statue of Liberty, and I will make an important political address." He also had the idea of

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bringing in the "Constitution" - sailing it - actually putting sails on it and bringing it down from Boston. We went through a lot of effort with the Navy to try to do this. It turned out to be mechanically infeasible, because the masts were too high to go under any of the bridges in New York, and the problem of taking the masts down and putting them up were insuperable. And Boston merchants began to complain. But he got quite excited about the thing. This

sort of thing gave us a great lift, because it made you feel that not only were you working for the President of the United States, but there was a friend in a high place who could promote projects for you. So the boost was enormous.

KRAFT: You described early the Bundy staff as it existed when you first got there. Could you give some notion of the change and evolution as you sensed it from the beginning to now?

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FORRESTAL: Well, I think that before I arrived the first year I think the Bundy staff was different. I'm probably one of the differences that occurred. I have the impression without being sure that the original Bundy staff had some very high-powered, strong-minded people. Walt Rostow for one. I think Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] was on it for awhile and Carl Kaysen. You had a very powerful kind of staff that may have gone much further than I would ever have gone in attempting to impose their will or the President's will on the Departments. By the time I got down Walt had gone, Carl was mellowing somewhat, and we were much more careful.

I tended to believe the White House staff ought to be as inconspicuous as possible and certainly ought not to parade too violently any of its opinions about the way things should be done. So I think it operated in a much more subtle manner. It did not attempt to introduce brand new ideas by force into the governmental machinery. It tried to find somebody else in the other departments who had similar ideas and

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encouraged him to surface them, so that they could get to the President in the normal course. Bob Komer was also a very strong man, and I think he had also changed a lot too. He was a lot more quiet about it, and in that sense there was a change. I think actually all during the time that President Kennedy was alive the last two years at any rate - we became much more of a real arm of his thinking and less an independent source of ideas for him. Mac, I think, was always an "arm" of the President's thinking. I don't think that Mac tried to put a great many shocking ideas into the President's head.

KRAFT: I think that covers it. This is the conclusion of the first interview with Michael Forrestal by Joseph Kraft which took place in Washington on April 8th.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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