

INTERVIEW WITH

John McCone

by

Dr. Thomas Soapes
Oral Historian

on

July 26, 1976

for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



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John Alex McCone

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This interview is being conducted with Mr. John McCone in his office in Los Angeles, California on July 26, 1976. The interviewer is Dr. Thomas Soapes of the Eisenhower Library. Present for the interview are Mr. McCone and Dr. Soapes.

DR. SOAPES: Mr. McCone, I understand you had some association with General Eisenhower long before he was in the White House.

MR. McCONE: Yes, I first got to know President Eisenhower when he was chief of staff of the army, after his return from Europe in 1946 or '47, early '47. And I was in close contact with him through all the years from that time until the time of his death.

DR. SOAPES: Did you have much contact with him while he was at NATO?

MR. McCONE: Oh, yes, I had a great deal of contact with him while he was at NATO. He went over to NATO, as I recall, in January of 1951. He was selected by President Truman in late November or early December of 1950. At that time he gave up as President of Columbia University and spent several weeks preparing for his mission to NATO. During that time he selected the principal officers that would be on his staff. I saw a great deal of him during that period because at that time I was under secretary of the air force.



SOAPES: What was the nature of your contact with him? Was this planning the air force operations in relation to NATO, or--

McCONE: Well, it was both. It was both the relationships because of my responsibility in the air force and also my personal relationship.

SOAPES: Did you have a number of social contacts with the Eisenhowers?

McCONE: Not a great many. Not a great many. We had some during his period in New York and in Washington and then frequently in Paris, later.

SOAPES: Personal traits of the man that stood out to you at that time.

McCONE: Well, it's very difficult to answer a question of that type without dealing in specific areas. I recognize him as a very unusual commander. He had a great facility for picking out men of capability and giving them great responsibility. In that regard, I looked upon him as an excellent



administrator following a traditional administrative course that a man that's spent his life in the military service would follow. Personally, I always found him a very engaging individual, thoughtful man, man that had very serious moments and also humorous ones. He could carry serious responsibilities to their point of ultimate decision and then cast them off and turn to a somewhat lighter vein. He enjoyed outlets that relieved him of his annoying responsibilities such as playing bridge and playing golf, which he did frequently, but never permitted them to interfere with his responsibilities either in the military, at NATO, or later when he became President. And even afterwards, after he'd retired as President he devoted great periods of time to responsibilities that he felt were his because of his influence that his voice had in the country.



SOAPES: In your capacity as under secretary of the air force, what were the major issues that you dealt with him on?

MCCONE: Well the first major issue when he went to NATO was to relieve men who were in positions of high responsibility in

the air force so that they could serve on his staff. The principal one was General Lauris Norstad, who was deputy chief of staff under General [Hoyt] Vandenberg and who Eisenhower wanted because of a long association with him. And we re-arranged our air staff to permit Norstad to go to Europe, which he did, with the General. And there were a number of others-- I'd have to research it a little bit--but I think that answers the question.

The other area was the type of equipment that he would need for NATO and particularly the possible use of nuclear weapons. In those days, you know, weapons were counted in the tens or dozens, not the thousands that they are now. But in 1949 and early '50 President Truman authorized a vast expansion of our weapon-making capability. He authorized the tripling of the capacity of Oak Ridge by not only expanding Oak Ridge but by building both Portsmouth and Paducah gaseous diffusion complexes. And he also authorized the building of Savannah River which about duplicated the capability of Hanford, Washington in the production of plutonium. Now when you translated this into weapon availability it made quite a different picture than had existed earlier and the possibility of nuclear weapons



being available for tactical purposes first came to light at that time. And I had a great deal to do with Eisenhower in that regard and on that subject because the availability and strategic and tactical consequences of that availability were not readily grasped. And it took a little doing for the availability of this new resource to be ground into the tactical and strategic plans of the various services.

SOAPES: How did Eisenhower respond to this problem of learning about nuclear capability?

MCCONE: Well he responded immediately and enthusiastically because, at that time, the Soviets had a massive superiority of conventional weapons and manpower. We, as you know, in the United States had pretty well demobilized following World War II and for a period of several years following World War II had done little if anything in the way of military procurement. And the Russians took a different course; they did not demobilize. They kept their forces intact and hence Eisenhower was in a very serious deficiency in both manpower and equipment, conventional equipment vis-a-vis the Russians when he was establishing NATO. He, therefore, looked upon the potential



availability of tactical nuclear weapons as a counterbalance and as a resource that would offset this inferiority in numbers of conventional weapons and men to man them.

SOAPES: What was your own personal estimate at that time, in the early 1950s, as to the strength of NATO as a military force? Was it credible?



McCONE: No, it was not credible in those early days. It was going through the agony of organization. But it is significant, and therefore if it had been put to the test of armed conflict, in the absence of tactical nuclear weapons and in recognition of the shortages of conventional weapons, it'd been relatively easy for the Soviets to reach the channel and maybe even a little further across the channel into Britain, you know, that sort of thing. There would have been very little to stop them at that time except to resort to nuclear war which would have been a very difficult decision for anyone to make. So from that standpoint NATO was not credible. As a political force, it was. It was a very wise decision, creation of it. And the evidence of it is in fact that from the day it was created there hasn't been a single foot of soil lost to communist

domination. There were various threats made against Berlin, against Austria, but the westward march of international communism was stopped and has remained stopped ever since.

SOAPES: Did you have any involvement in the 1952 presidential campaign?

McCONE: Very little. I was a great supporter of Eisenhower, but I was not active in political fields--I never have been active in political fields. Contributed some money of course but not a great deal of that. I was in constant communication with him, assisted on some of his speeches, things such as that. But in terms of being active in the sense that some of these people who were devoting their full time to the organization campaign, planning the strategy of it both before and after the convention, I was not involved. Was not a delegate to the convention; I've never been a delegate to any convention.

SOAPES: Was your contact with him sufficient to give you some feel of how Eisenhower felt about giving up the military career for a political career?

McCONE: Yes, it was. See he had given up his military career, /gave up his military career/in '47 or '48 when he went to



Columbia. He returned to a military career out of sense of duty and it was on a temporary arrangement. He had no thought that he ever expressed to me of remaining for a long period of time in NATO or for devoting the rest of his life to a military career itself. Once he had the NATO established, organized, he naturally would have given consideration to retiring, either returning to an academic position or something else. In the meantime both parties were seeking him as a candidate for the President in 1952, and I think that he concluded that to run for office and if successful to sit for a period as the President of the United States would have given him a chance to exercise influence on the affairs of the world in a very critical moment. I think it was a rather natural move. I think it was rather difficult for him to decide to go into a political career. But your question concerns his retiring from military. I don't think that was very difficult for him to do, because he had done it. He was returned on a temporary basis out of a sense of duty to his country, but not out of a long-term commitment. The continuity of his life in the military had been broken.



SOAPES: Do you think he felt that he had fully accomplished his mission at NATO by 1952?

McCONE: Well, he had such great confidence in General [Alfred] Gruenther who succeeded him and General Norstad who became the air commander and in some of the Europeans, too. I think he felt he was leaving the post in excellent hands, and I don't think that that worried him.

SOAPES: Did he offer you a position in the administration early on, 1953?

McCONE: Yes, he offered me the secretary of the air force.

But I had been under secretary and there was some congressional criticism of some of the contracts that had been awarded during my period as under secretary and these were subjects that the armed services committee of the Senate was investigating. And I told him that until the matters had been resolved, that any question or questions relating to the award of the contracts had been disposed of to the satisfaction of the Congress, I would not consider entering his administration. And he understood that.



SOAPES: You then went back to private business?

McCONE: Yes, I went back to private business. I never totally gave up my private business because there was no conflict of interest and my business interests were wholly owned; so it was not difficult for me to leave them in the hands of competent men in my organization. So I just came back and moved back into my office, that's what that amounted to. There was no problem with me in my various tours of duty in government, and there have been several of them, of disassociating myself from business and then having to find a new area of activity when I returned to private life because I kept it all going. And fortunately could do so because of the nature of the business without any conflict of interest.



SOAPES: Did Eisenhower or any members of his administration ever call on you during that first term?

McCONE: Oh, yes. Yes. Eisenhower called on me at various times. Called on me shortly after he was installed to serve on a commission headed by Dr. Henry Wriston, who was then president of Brown University, to examine into the organization of the

foreign service. He and John Foster Dulles, in about 1954, asked me to serve as under secretary of state. By that time this problem that I mentioned to you had long been disposed of to everybody's satisfaction. But I couldn't do that because in the intervening time I'd made some substantial commitments that I had to see them through which would require a few years. But then I was called on for various things of a consultive nature, until 19--late '57 or early '58 when they asked me to become chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, which I did. By that time my affairs were in shape so that I could do so.

SOAPES: Going back to the Wriston Commission for a moment, what was the major thrust of that committee's action?



McCONE: Well the major thrust was to expand the foreign service very substantially--really remold it so that it was larger and more vital and had expanded responsibilities and permitted entrance laterally rather than from the bottom. We were very, very successful because the foreign service had come to be a very small, select group and, because of their size and because of the manner in which you entered the foreign service, it had

less influence and less responsibility than it should have had. Now there'd been a number of reports made, studies made, and they all concluded, in one way or another, that the foreign service had to be changed. But the reports always found themselves in the bottom drawer of somebody's desk, as reports do. So President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles felt that they ought to make one more try at it, created this Wriston Committee and we spent six months working on it and made a report with some twenty-five or thirty recommendations, all of which were accepted by the secretary and the President. Then we did another thing, just to be sure the report wouldn't find its way to the bottom drawer--we met every six months for two years to just see how it was being implemented. So we policed the actions, much to the unhappiness of certain people in the state department and the foreign service, but to the great pleasure of both the President and Secretary Dulles. So we got along fine.

SOAPES: Those people who were displeased were senior civil servants who were--

McCONE: No, senior foreign service officers. They kind of hold themselves apart and aloof from senior civil servants.



It's a very important distinction.

SOAPES: Could you characterize the other requests that he made of you during that first term? Did they involve military-foreign policy issues?

McCONE: Yes, he did. He had me call on certain people in Europe. He had me check into certain matters in the department of defense and had me review certain controversial budget items. But they were all in an advisory role, not an administrative role.

SOAPES: Who were some of the people that he asked you to see?

McCONE: Oh, I'd have to go back over my notes: I don't think that's particularly relevant.

SOAPES: How did he approach you about coming to the AEC?

McCONE: Well, he had Sherman Adams call me up and ask me to come back to see him. I didn't know what he wanted me for, but when you get a request like that you go back. I happened to be in San Antonio at the time and I went back and he outlined what he had in mind. Specifically he told me, at a luncheon,



just the two of us were together, that Lewis Strauss was going to retire and he'd like to appoint me to the commission; once I was confirmed as a member of the commission then he could appoint me chairman. That's the procedure as followed in appointing commissioners. The chairman of the commission serves at the President's will; he can remove him at any time. He can't remove him from the commission; he's appointed for five years, as you know, on the AEC. Most commission appointments are five years. So he asked me to do that, if I'd undertake it, and I said I wanted to talk to my business associates to see if everything could be kept in order and also my wife, see if she could adjust herself to living in Washington for awhile, and let him know, which I did within a matter of a very few days. And I went down and appeared before the joint committee, finally reported out, voted on by the Senate, and was installed as a commissioner and then he immediately appointed me as chairman. I've since heard and knew that it was on the recommendation of Lewis Strauss and approved by Sherman Adams are the ones that advanced my name after having gone through possible candidates, as the person that they'd like to suggest to the President for taking over the position.



SOAPES: How well did you know Sherman Adams?

McCONE: I knew him very well. I knew Sherman Adams very well.

SOAPES: He has, of course, a reputation as being a very blunt man. Did you find him that way?

McCONE: No, I found him a very reasonable fellow. I liked him very much. He was a steely little New Hampshireite, of course. Was very smart. I was terribly sorry to see him get into the trouble that he got into which ended his career in Washington. But he did it. While it wasn't as serious an infraction of principle as some we've seen more recently, nevertheless it was sufficiently serious so that President Eisenhower had to ask him to leave. He had two difficult decisions to make--one with Sherman Adams and the other in a totally unrealted matter was Harold Talbott, who was secretary of the air force and a man that Eisenhower was very close to personally. One of the few people that would be called in on Sunday afternoon to play bridge and that sort of thing, and who had been his finance chairman. But the minute that accusations were made against Harold, which on an investigation of the



Eisenhower White House staff seemed to be valid accusations, he had no hesitancy in asking Harold to leave.

[Interruption]



SOAPES: When you took over as the chairman of the AEC, what do you recall were the major problems that you had to deal with?

McCONE: There were a number. The major problem was the bad blood that had developed between certain members of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and the Atomic Energy Commission. Principally bad blood between Clinton Anderson and Chet Holifield on the one hand and Lewis Strauss on the other. This developed over a period of years for various reasons. They were on opposite poles of the political spectrum in the first place. And we were just then beginning to open up the possibility of nuclear power, and they felt that nuclear power should be developed by public means, TVA sort of thing. And Lewis Strauss, two or three of his associates, were equally determined it should be developed through the stockholders-owned public power companies, Consolidated Edison or Southern California Edison or Commonwealth Edison, so forth. And this created a great deal of totally

unnecessary friction. But it was only one of the issues. Second issue was the famous Oppenheimer case in which Oppenheimer had sacrificed his security clearances for reasons which were thoroughly investigated and I won't try to recount them here. And those are just two but there were many. So, in answer to your question, my first serious problem was to try and repair the damage that had been done to the whole atomic energy program through the misunderstandings and the disagreements of the commission on the one hand and the joint committee on the other. This permeated the staffs on both sides and was constantly being reported and in many instances exaggerated in the press and was holding back progress on a broad front.

SOAPES: How did you go about mending the fences?



McCONE: Well I went about it first by developing a reasonable personal relationship with individuals on the committee and then reasoning with them that there was room for development by both sides. I could see that the public power people, TVA, and others could make a substantial contribution, and I could also see that the stockholder-owned power companies could make a

contribution. And they finally agreed that was about right. So when we got together on that subject and developed a confidence, one in the other, we created a very satisfactory working arrangement that existed throughout my period and also throughout my period as director of the Central Intelligence, because I felt that the joint committee, because of their responsibility in the nuclear weapon field, should know more about the Soviet nuclear capabilities and order of battle than they did know before I adopted a new policy for CIA of briefing them, which they appreciated. So the relationship entirely changed in a rather short time. And I think President Eisenhower appreciated that very much, because having trouble between one of his agencies and a committee on the Hill as powerful as the joint committee is something that any President and particularly President Eisenhower would not like. Just couldn't tolerate, although he never lost his friendship for or respect, admiration of Lewis Strauss, which continued up till the time of his death.



SOAPES: You mentioned that Eisenhower was concerned about relationships between agencies and the Hill. Is this executive-congressional relation something that you ever discussed with him?

McCONE: Oh, many times, yes, many times. And he always wanted them on a good basis. He never wanted to sacrifice principle or his policies in order to make a peaceful resolution of the difference with a committee. He'd stay right by his guns if he thought he was right. But if their differences were of a personality nature and where there was room to meet the purposes of the two opposing parties without sacrificing principles, he was always willing to do that.

SOAPES: You mentioned the Oppenheimer case was something you were dealing with. How did you handle that?



McCONE: Well the Oppenheimer case had just been resolved when I took over. The Gray board had made it's report, commission had considered the Gray board and accepted it's recommendation, the fact that Oppenheimer, his clearances would not be restored. I've forgotten whether he had actually gone to court on the matter or not. His problem was that he did engage in some intimate discussions with very suspect people and then under oath denied that he had done so. That was more the accusation that was brought against him than any identifiable breach of security. Almost immediately after I became chairman I was asked by the

joint committee if I would reopen the case because the joint committee were suspect that actions of the commission and even the actions of the Gray board were not balanced. And my response was that I would open the case under two conditions, but both conditions had to be met. One was that there would be new evidence that had not been presented and second was that Oppenheimer wanted it reopened. I said, "This has been a traumatic experience for him and he may not want to hear of it again, I don't know. So if there's new information and if he wants it reopened, then I'll reopen it. But it has to be both those conditions." And those conditions didn't materialize. Oppenheimer never expressed a desire to have it reopened and there was no new evidence that ever came forth that would have affected a decision such as the Gray board decision. So the matter just was let stand. Oppenheimer subsequently, despite this finding, was awarded by President Kennedy the Fermi award, and that award was made for his contributions in the nuclear physics field and the development of the atomic bomb. Had nothing to do with this other accusation. I was asked by President Kennedy whether I would oppose the award to Oppenheimer and I said I wouldn't oppose it. He did make a



great contribution and that hadn't anything to do with this subsequent matter. And indeed I went with President Kennedy to the award myself, which was rather surprising to Oppenheimer. I'd had a long background with Oppenheimer; I'd had some debates with him and so forth on nuclear policies in which we differed sharply. But I never never felt, for all his trouble, we should discount the great contribution he made. He made a great contribution.

[Interruption]

SOAPES: We've discussed the relationship of the AEC and the Congress, how about with the AEC and other branches of the executive departments, thinking particularly of State and DOD?

McCONE: Well, generally speaking the relationships were good. Of course there's always been a difficulty with the Department of Defense because of the authority that the AEC has over the civilian control of the weapons. And as the weapons became more numerous and became distributed, the Department of Defense wanted more and more unilateral and totally independent control.



This required a whole series of negotiations that sometimes were difficult but were all worked out. State on the other hand had a very keen interest in all third country arrangements, a treaty to share nuclear knowledge with the British and what should we do about the French. And at that time we were creating and building up the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, so forth. All these things required close collaboration with the State Department, because the Atomic Energy Act was written to give really great power to the Atomic Energy Commission. It cut across the traditional departmental authority of both State and Defense, and therefore one was continually in negotiation, resolving different bureaucratic opinions as best they could be resolved in working with them. There were never any serious scars; there was very little bloodletting. But sometimes we'd have to take a firm position. Also with Interior over the production of uranium which got into their area of responsibility. But they weren't serious. They worked out pretty well.

SOAPES: In regard to the International Atomic Energy Agency-- of course this is an outgrowth of Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace



proposal--what was your estimate of the effectiveness of the International Atomic Energy Agency and Eisenhower's efforts to promote the peaceful uses of atomic energy?

McCONE: Well, the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency was a necessity for the reason that, under the feeling that as the use of the atom--most particularly in the development of power--would expand throughout the world over a period of the future decades, it would be necessary to establish some form of safeguards so that the special nuclear materials it generated in the operation of a power reactor when separated from the burnt fuel couldn't be used to make the atomic bombs. There had to be some international safeguarding to see that there weren't a proliferation of countries that had an atomic capability. Now we had great difficulty with the Russians on that. For the first two or three years of the existence of the agency the Russians violently opposed international inspection and control. They have since changed and now are just as strong supporter of international safeguards as the United States is. The United States unilaterally created, as part of their Atoms for Peace program, the educating of a great many countries by



giving to them experimental reactors so that they would become accustomed to the operation of a reactor and to the handling of radioactive materials. We did that in a great many countries. Some countries were not prepared to enter the field such as, you might say, Vietnam, Korea, other less advanced countries. I've forgotten how many of these reactors, experimental laboratory type reactors, were set up around the world, but maybe a hundred of them. I think that, in retrospect, we went a little too fast on that. But we did it and as a result we created scientists in various parts of the world in this rather exotic field. Eisenhower had hopes that through his Atoms for Peace program he could draw the world together into an international control agent that would not only insure that independent countries didn't acquire a nuclear capability, but at the same time would be sure that such nuclear capability as existed at the time would be held in the hands of some international consortium. You recall the Acheson-Lilienthal proposals which were laid before the United Nations had that as its basic purpose. But unfortunately the Soviets would not go along so it didn't get any place. But Eisenhower was fearful of the proliferation



of nuclear weapons and the consequences of it at the first two, then five, then fifteen nuclear powered--. He was up against it as to just how to handle the problem and this was his solution; a good one, but, until the Soviets would come into it, it was not good. And I'm not sure that the French would have come in any way or the Chinese. Nevertheless that was a good college try on his part.

SOAPES: In, I think it was 1958, he proposed the halt of nuclear testing. As I recall, you were not enthusiastic about that move.

McCONE: Yes, that's exactly right, I was not enthusiastic about it. And the reason for it was that, of course at that time--to preface what I'm going to say--at that time there was a great deal of concern in this country and internationally over the effect of fallout from the rather extensive tests that we had been making out in the Pacific and the very extensive tests the Soviets had been making in the north. And so there was a sufficiently high degree of radioactivity in the upper atmosphere to make people apprehensive that as this came to



earth and brought down naturally or by rain and other causes, would create a serious health hazard, that it would develop possible cancer, affect children at birth and all that sort of thing. So Eisenhower got an arrangement going with Khrushchev to suspend atmospheric nuclear tests during a period when we were trying to negotiate a treaty for the suspension. So this was a moratorium on testing. Now the commission opposed that for the reason that they had a statutory responsibility to advance the art of nuclear weapons, which they couldn't do unless they tested them. And they were fearful or convinced that the Soviets could continue their nuclear testing and could make their advances and we couldn't detect their testing, which was true. So the commission unanimously opposed this. I as the spokesman of the commission had to take the position opposing Eisenhower's program. Which I did. And he got very angry with me at times for doing it. But even though he got angry with me, he realized I had no alternative. But he took the position, as he explained to me, that, he said, "I realize your responsibility, but you have to realize mine. I've got a broader responsibility. My responsibility is to conduct the affairs of this government in a



manner in which I think will secure the peace so far as it's possible to do so. And I feel that it's a worthwhile bet for us to gamble that Khrushchev will keep his word and they will not test while these negotiations are going on in Geneva."

Well the negotiations went on and on and on till the end of the Eisenhower administration and they never got any place because we could never agree with the Russians on inspection. And until you had some means of verification and inspection, no agreement with the Russians on inspection. And until you had some means of verification and inspection, no agreement with the Russians, in my opinion, was any good. I think everybody pretty well agreed on that.

So when President Kennedy came along he sent an emissary to see me to ask me to continue as the chairman of the commission. My term had not run out and the word was that he'd like me to continue at least for a year or longer if I would. He knew or probably assumed I wanted to go back to private life and, being a Republican, I wouldn't be particularly compatible with his administration. And I would not do that for the reason that I felt that he should have a chairman who was not on the record in this matter that he had to deal with. And I assumed that he



probably would want to continue the moratorium and I would have to continue to oppose it. So our relationship would be off to a bad start on the first day, so I thought better for somebody else to--. So rather than say I wouldn't accept it, I just sent over the names of the two or three people that I thought could do the job and he chose one of them as his chairman. So that was a good solution. I didn't have to say no, but I helped him out. It would have been very difficult in my relationship with him. The difficulties in my relationship with Eisenhower were tolerable because of our personal relationship at the same time. But I didn't have that personal relationship with Kennedy.



SOAPES: So Eisenhower's motive in this moratorium was a way to get negotiations going with the Russinas on limiting nuclear testing as well as nuclear weapons?

McCONE: Yes. What he thought was that we've got a negotiation, we've got a conference going in Geneva. That conference will make better progress if neither one of us tests in the meantime. This is about the way he analyzed it. So he said to Khrushchev,

"Let's call a halt to testing until we see whether this negotiation can work out." Which it never did until recently. But you see there was a dramatic change took place. In the latter part of the Eisenhower administration and the early part of the Kennedy administration we developed facilities for detection so when President Kennedy, couple of years later, proposed as he did in a speech at Georgetown that atmospheric testing be eliminated, I could support that. The fact is he called me and asked me if I would support it and I said, "Yes, I'll support it." And of course the joint committee immediately had me up as to why I supported it and why I didn't support it before. Well I laid out to them that the detection facilities had been created in the meantime. And then they were perfectly satisfied, you see. Merely a matter of having advanced an art to a point where you knew what the other fellow was doing. And then there was no reason for me to take the position that I had taken earlier.

SOAPES: What about your relationship with the President's Science Advisory Committee--[James R.] Killian, [George B.] Kistiakowsky?



McCONE: My relationship with Killian when he was chairman of the President's Science Advisory Committee and I was chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission were good. I appealed to him to resolve some differences that I had with the Air Force because I felt the Air Force was trying to insist on a program of development of extremely large weapons that were not called for and were very expensive and used an enormous amount of special nuclear materials. And when I couldn't resolve the issue with General [Curtis] LeMay or the secretary of defense, I went to Killian and he had his committee consider it and then made a recommendation to the President which was satisfactory to the AEC. Killian opposed my becoming director of Central Intelligence on the basis that I was more of an outspoken anti-communist than should be in that position and I was incapable of making a fair evaluation and that my estimates would be slanted. He, at that time, had moved from chairman of the President's Scientific Advisory Committee to chairman of his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. But that difference was resolved in a very short time. And my relationship to this day with Killian are very intimate. We correspond regularly and I have great respect for him.



Kistiakowsky I have trouble with in both the Eisenhower administration and in the Kennedy administration because I thought he would not always stand by the stated principles of being sure of verification, whatever agreements you went into. Always appeared to me to be one that would sacrifice some of those very important details.

[Interruption]

SOAPES: Is there anything else you were going to say about Kistiakowsky?

McCONE: No, I grew to admire Kistiakowsky as a scientist and as a very informed man. I thought he was better in that area than he was in the political field.

SOAPES: Did Eisenhower consult with you on areas outside the very strict purview of the AEC?

McCONE: Yes, quite frequently. See he seated me on the National Security Council, which was not because I was chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission but because of our personal relationship. And he also seated me on the cabinet--that chair



right there was my cabinet chair--which was a great honor and a great privilege but was not done for anyone else before or since. And he did ask me to do things outside of my field. Now I remember one time there was a great discussion over whether they would fund some advances in the missile propulsion field to give us a space capability. And [Wernher] Von Braun had a plan and needed a couple hundred million dollars in a budget that was badly strained. So here was the NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] fighting for this money; Bureau of the Budget and the Treasury opposing it; the President's scientific adviser favoring it; and the President didn't know what to do. So he called me over and asked me if I would go down to Redstone Arsenal and survey the situation and report to him what I thought he should do. So I went down and spent two days down there and went into it very thoroughly. And I could see that if we didn't do it, we would be stopped as far as space exploration is concerned and what they proposed to do was totally feasible, totally practical, and, while it was expensive in the terms of two hundred million dollars, unless that money was spent we might as well just forget the field. So I came back and reported personally and alone to Eisenhower on it.



And he said, "All right, if that's the way you feel about it, we'll put it in the budget." So they did. So that says a little, interesting little vignette of how he drew me out of the sphere of the AEC for certain matters.

SOAPES: I don't know if you were in a position to answer this question, but would he draw people out of their billets into other areas?

McCONE: I don't know to what extent he did that. He did it with me on different occasions. And I assume he did it with others, although I don't know.

SOAPES: You say that you were with the NSC and with the Cabinet. I'm wondering how Eisenhower used these bodies?

McCONE: Well he used the NSC very differently than it had ever been used before or since. He was very methodical about it. We would meet every Thursday morning, I believe, or maybe every second Thursday--I think it was every Thursday morning we'd meet. He had a staff--what did they call it? It was presided over by his executive director of the NSC. This staff was called, I think, the planning board or some such thing.



SOAPES: OCB? Operations Coordinating Board?

McCONE: Maybe it was the Operations Coordinating Board. And they would meet and give consideration to problems that were to be presented to the NSC. Let's say, for an example, it would be a question of our relationship with Diem in South Vietnam. So we'd open an NSC meeting with a briefing by Allen Dulles, and then there would be a formal agenda prepared and the matter before the NSC would be presented by the executive director, Gordon Gray, while I was there. Anderson, I believe, from Texas was his predecessor.

SOAPES: Dillon Anderson.

McCONE: Dillon Anderson. And Gordon would wind up his presentation and he said, "Now the issue is this. The state department feels this way and the defense department feels this way. Other departments have not expressed themselves." So Eisenhower would say, "Well, Mr. Dulles, will you present your position to the NSC?" And Dulles would have it all prepared and present it. Or he might have two or three staff people come in and present their position. Then he'd turn to his secretary of defense and ask



him for his response. So he'd listen to them both in the presence of the council and question them and let them debate back and forth, so on and so forth. And then he'd make his decision. He made it, right there, after hearing them. Now this was his regular procedure.

Now his Cabinet meetings were somewhat similar, concerning themselves less with the specific of problems in which there were differences in departments. He would use his Cabinet to explain broader principles of government and to allow others to explain broader principles under which they were operating, whether it be agriculture, or state, or the vice-president. The vice-president would frequently brief the Cabinet after one of his foreign travels. But he used both the National Security Council and the Cabinet, and particularly the former, very effectively in my opinion. Very effectively. Much more so than either President Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson or President Nixon.

SOAPES: Did you get a sense that any debate that was going on either at the NSC or the Cabinet made a great deal of difference to his decision?



McCONE: That's hard to answer. It's hard to answer. I think the fact that he heard the discussions, one side in the presence of the other side, gave them an opportunity to put forth their views in the most detailed, complete way with unlimited time if necessary. Bound to have some effect on his decisions. I don't think he went into those meetings with any pre-established decisions and went through all of this thing for window-dressing because we did it too many times, you know.

SOAPES: Did he question?

McCONE: Oh, yes, you bet.

SOAPES: Was he a sharp questioner?

McCONE: Very much so. Very much so. Very sharp questioner. I can remember a debate about putting those short-range missiles in Italy and in Turkey, and I don't think he ever was quite satisfied that the answer as to the need for those missiles was sufficiently convincing, although he did go along with it.

SOAPES: How did he use Nixon in these meetings? Would he use him much at all?



McCONE: Very little. Very little. He was completely accurate in what he said in that press conference.

SOAPES: "Could you give me a few minutes?"

McCONE: Yes. "Give me a few minutes, I'll think it over, let you know next week." Something like that. He was pretty accurate.

SOAPES: But your assessment, then, in light of some of the debates that I imagine you've probably tired of hearing about lately, the NSC and Eisenhower's use of it, that Eisenhower was in definite control of what was going on in terms of foreign intelligence and foreign operations and was totally knowledgeable and was kept informed.

McCONE: That's right. That's right.



SOAPES: At the end of the Eisenhower administration in the 1960 campaign one of the issues that was raised was the relative military capacity of the United States vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. Was that a legitimate issue?

McCONE: No. No, it was not a legitimate issue at all. And the famous missile gap that Kennedy used to win the election

didn't exist. In fact it was just the reverse was true. The missile gap was on the Russian side, not on ours. But military had, without sound intelligence, propagandized the country in the press that the Russians had missiles running out of their ears, which they didn't have. On the other hand, the CIA did not have hard, irrefutable intelligence at that time to openly dispute these statements. They couldn't; they didn't have enough U-2 surveillance and they lost the U-2 earlier in the year as you remember. And they didn't have satellite surveillance at that time. The minute that we got satellite surveillance we could see that the claim was entirely wrong.

SOAPES: After Eisenhower was President, I believe you briefed him on behalf of Kennedy and Johnson, didn't you?

McCONE: Oh, frequently. Very frequently, yes.

SOAPES: What was the initiating source for those briefings? Was that Kennedy's idea or--?

McCONE: Yes, it was Kennedy's idea to have Eisenhower briefed and he insisted that I brief him regularly. And then it was Johnson's idea, and regardless of where the President was, whether he was at Gettysburg or out here at El Dorado. They insisted that I meet with him every month or six weeks or if



anything of great importance was coming up of an international nature, they'd want him briefed and I would always do it.

SOAPES: Could you characterized the briefings as to how much detail you went into, types of subjects you went into?

McCONE: Oh, I'd go into it in great detail. I'd go into it in great detail. And I'd go up to Gettysburg, usually meeting him in his office at maybe ten, ten-thirty in the morning and spend a couple of hours with him, and maybe stay for lunch, eat lunch together. It was difficult to do it because he was bitterly critical, privately, of both Kennedy and Johnson. And therefore, it was hard to present what they were doing and keep some of the emotion out of it. But finally he would come down with a viewpoint and ask me to reflect it to the President, which I always would do. When he was out here, I used to fly out and we'd have a briefing session, a round of golf, and dinner and then go home. That was a procedure I'd follow then.

SOAPES: In what ways was he critical of Kennedy and Johnson?

McCONE: I think that it grew out of his differences on the general conduct of the affairs of the country. He was not



satisfied with the escalation of the Vietnam war. See, in spite of all the pressure that was put on him by the military, he would never permit the stationing of more U.S. advisers, military advisers or trainers, in Saigon than was prescribed and agreed to in the 1954 agreement. Now granted the 1954 agreement sort of envisages the French would do that. Shortly after the agreement, the French pulled out and turned the role over to the United States. Be that as it may, despite the fact that we did not sign the 1954 agreement, Eisenhower kept the limit at eight hundred. He was very, very disturbed that Kennedy had increased that to, oh, fifteen or twenty thousand as a result of the report of Walt Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor. Eisenhower, in his last year, he could see the erosion of Diem's authority. He could see the growth of the communist oriented insurgents in various parts of the country as a domination of ever-increasing geographic areas. He told Kennedy that this was the most serious problem that he would face. Eisenhower felt that diplomatic actions with Diem and his people, trying to persuade them to modify some of the positions which had lost a lot of the approbation of the people was a first course of action. And secondly he thought that we should have the very best, most



able men in the eight hundred, but he wouldn't increase it. Now then when Kennedy accepted the Taylor-Rostow recommendation to increase it, it immediately drew a reaction from Eisenhower that this was going to cause an escalation, which it did. And then as Johnson continued to escalate, first to put more troops over there, first in a stationary location where they were protecting air bases and finally commit them to initiative on the ground, Eisenhower felt that the situation could escalate very rapidly and was very much opposed to it unless we were determined to use our total resources and win. But he was not prepared to recommend that. Because of his concern over Vietnam on the one hand, and over the variety of other things, both domestically and foreign that he did not favor, caused increasing criticism on his part of both Kennedy and Johnson. Now he never expressed this feeling publicly. He was very guarded and he only expressed it to a few people, maybe more so to me than any of them, I don't know. But he never expressed it publicly because if he did so then he would be doing them and the country a disservice and he wanted not to be identified as an antagonist of either Kennedy or Johnson because, free of that, then his advice and counsel would be sought. But once he appeared



publicly as an antagonist, why they would say, "Well, I won't pay any attention to him."

SOAPES: How did Kennedy and Johnson respond to his recommendations when you carried them back?

McCONE: Kennedy responded very thoughtfully to them; Johnson less so.

SOAPES: In these last years of Eisenhower's life in the 1960s, your impression then is of a man who, while not wanting to go public with his views, still maintained a great deal of interest in national affairs and kept himself abreast of things?

McCONE: Oh, yes. Very much so. Very much so. Of course, he was writing continuously. He wrote those two volumes and there were a great many statements and articles attributed to him. He kept very much abreast of things until his illness reached its final stages.

SOAPES: As a closing question, one that we frequently ask, if you could just give briefly your own estimate of Eisenhower's performance as President--you worked very closely with several Presidents--Eisenhower's strengths and weaknesses.



McCONE: Well, I thought Eisenhower was a very great President during his time. He took office at a time when we needed a cooling-off. We had gone through a violent war and hardly gotten out of it than we got into another one, and his first action of importance was to bring that Korean war to a halt. Not to a halt that was unsatisfactory to him. Sometimes you have to be thankful that you've established peace even if it isn't the kind of a peace you set out to establish. But it was necessary to unwind the nation from the regimentation of war years, and he did that very effectively. He did a lot of other things. He promoted our relationship with western Europe and with Japan, relationships that had been started under Truman, which is the creation of NATO and the understanding with Japan and so forth. And he promoted strengthening of those ties. He also acted with great strength in connection with the perils of Formosa. He could do nothing with communist China; it was gone before he took over. But he saw to it that the growth of communist China stopped at the water's edge and it didn't come across to the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, nor did it get to Formosa itself. He acted decisively in a number of areas. Guatemala is one and Lebanon another, and so on and



so forth. But with very little fanfare and always commanding the support of the Congress, despite of the fact that six of his eight years he had a Democratic Congress--they had great confidence in him. I think that Eisenhower will be, well I think that he's a very, very important mind to have in the Presidency during those years. I don't think that history is going to record him as a great President. It will record him as a great general. A hundred years from now, he'll be known for what he did as a general rather than what he did as a President. I don't say this critically of him; it's just my appraisal. Looking at other Presidents, I think that history will remember Kennedy because he was a man tragically assassinated, but there's very little of what he did that will be remembered. Johnson will be remembered negatively for his conduct of the Vietnam war--positively for his success as a legislator, but not as a President. Truman, in my opinion, is going to be recorded as a decisive President who made some very good decisions. In the passage of time the criticism of Truman was trival but the type that stirred people up, ranging from fur coats to réfrigerators and so on and so--been forgotten.



What was not forgotten was the fact that he stood up with the Truman Doctrine in Greece and Turkey and NATO and so on and so on and so forth. Berlin Airlift and the dropping of the bomb at Hiroshima was a courageous decision that he had to make. Interesting to reflect on the four Presidents, having worked close-range with all of them.

SOAPES: If you had to rate them in terms of--I hate to use this word because it's so difficult to define but it's the only word I can think of--in terms of their intellectual capacities, who would you rate at the top?

McCONE: Well if you're talking about intellectual capacity in terms of a scholar, I think you have to rate Kennedy at the top. If you're talking about intellectual capacity in terms of a negotiator, you have to rate Johnson at the top. If you're talking about intellectual capacity in the terms of a decisive decision-maker, probably have to turn to Truman. On the other hand, if you talking intellectual capacity in terms of person who could view the breadth of his total responsibility and reach some decisions as to what is best for the country, given the conditions in which he found himself, Eisenhower would be



by far the best. That's kind of boxing the compass for you.

SOAPES: What you're saying is that you're talking about four competent men, but competent in very different ways.

MCCONE: That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

[Interruption]

MCCONE: I arrived in Paris on January the 7th, I believe it was, in 1951 leaving New York, Mrs. McCone and I had the evening papers. In those days you'd get on a constellation and the plane'd leave about six o'clock and you'd go to bed and get there the next morning. And the headlines were that Cabot Lodge knew that Eisenhower was a candidate for President and he knew he was a Republican. So I had a lunch date the next day with Eisenhower. And so I follow my practice of, when I have a night flight I usually go to a hotel and go to bed for two or three hours and then get up in mid-morning and you've shaken off the problem of the time change and the vibration of the plane and all of the rest. I'd hardly



crawled in when the phone rang and it was Eisenhower's executive officer saying that the General wanted to see me right away. And I said, "All right, I'll come out in a little while."

He said, "The General's car is on the way to the Ritz now."

So I scrambled out of bed, took a shower, went down and got in the car, and went out to SHAPE. And the place was virtually surrounded by reporters. I was ushered in the back way and here was Eisenhower and General [Wilton B.] Persons and General Gruenther and General Norstad and Ike said, "Cabot Lodge made this statement and I've got to answer it and we're drafting an answer and I'd like you to be here to help with it."

So we spent all morning drafting that answer, coffee pots coming in and copy going out, and being written up and then change here, change there--you know how these drafting sessions go. So he was ready to confirm that Cabot Lodge was right; he was a candidate or would be a candidate for President and he thought this NATO organization was in such shape that he could be relieved and he, in due time, would return and offer himself



as a candidate. So the discussion centered around whether he should say that he was a Republican and some of the group said, "Well, you've said that Cabot Lodge was right; Cabot Lodge said you were Republican, so why do you have to say you're Republican?"

I insisted he say he was a Republican. I said, "Twenty percent of the people know what Cabot Lodge said, but a hundred percent of the people are going to know what you say, so you better put it in there." So he agreed to it.

And we had quite a time getting that wording so that he would state in that response he was a Republican. But finally he agreed and that this was right, since this was his intention, and that he should say it unequivocally and without reservation. It was always interesting to me that this little group of the five of us were the ones that sat in on the session when that decision was made and the announcement was drafted and released to the press three o'clock that afternoon.

SOAPES: Was he relieved to get this over with?

McCONE: I thought he was very relieved, you see, because there'd been a lot of conjecture for several months. He was



very relieved. But at that he didn't return until May, you remember, came back in May and went to Abilene and made that speech. And then of course he got into that terrible conflict with Bob Taft in which Taft actually went into the convention with the delegates to win the nomination and lost it only because the Texas delegation was disqualified for some reason-- I've forgotten why.

SOAPES: Yes, their selection process.

McCONE: Something.

SOAPES: The so-called "Fair Play" amendment .

McCONE: Yes, yes. Once he won the nomination he carried on a great campaign I thought. He went up to Denver to establish headquarters and lived at Mrs. Doud's home, Mrs. Eisenhower's mother. And I visited with him a number of times during that period. We were working on speeches and things of that kind. And then I saw him, dined with him the night before he left to go to Korea, remember?

SOAPES: Yes.



McCONE: Surprised everybody, said, "I'll go to Korea," and he got up the next morning and left five o'clock, went out to Korea. He did a spectacular job I thought.

SOAPES: When working on the speechwriting, I've heard a lot of stories of people telling me that he was a very precise editor.

McCONE: Yes. Yes, he was a very percise editor. And he'd like to dramatize things. I remember his talking about extravagances in the military, lit on the fact that fifty years worth of anchor chain was in a navy yard in Baltimore or something. That just tickled him to death. He thought-- "For Christ's sake"--of course--see it was just a fly speck in the military budget, but it dramatized what he was talking about.

