

Lucius D. Clay Oral History Interview—7/1/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Lucius D. Clay
Interviewer: Richard M. Scammon
Date of Interview: July 1, 1964
Location: New York City, N.Y.
Length: 24 pages

Biographical Note

Clay, General in the U.S. Army, member of the American Red Cross board of governors, and President John F. Kennedy's (JFK) personal representative in Berlin (1961-1962), discusses Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1961 visit to Berlin, the Berlin Wall crisis, and JFK's special committee to study foreign aid, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

Lucius D. Clay, recorded interview by Richard M. Scammon, July 1, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Lucius D. Clay

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Lucius D. Clay

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Oral History Interview

with

General Lucius D. Clay

By Mr. Richard M. Scammon

July 1, 1964,
General Clay's office at Lehman Brothers,
#1 William Street, New York City.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SCAMMON: General Clay, in thinking over the past few years, perhaps we could start best by your telling me when you first met the President [John F. Kennedy] when he was in the Congress. For example, did you have any contact with him when you were in Berlin as he was in the Congress?

CLAY: Yes, when I was in Berlin, right after the War [World War II] and he had first entered Congress, he visited Berlin and that was the first opportunity I had to meet him. We talked rather informally at that time about the Berlin problem, and I believe that that was the last actual contact I had with President Kennedy until after he became President. I may have met him at one or two public affairs, but I had no intimate contact with him until after he became President.

SCAMMON: Now, he was then just a freshman, or at most a sophomore, as congressman. Do you carry any remembrances of that with you, or was he just another young man in Congress?

CLAY: Well, he was just another young man in Congress. Although I remember him then as being very personally attractive and a man of acute intelligence, I can't

remember any other details, except that he had impressed me because of his personality. Actually, if I had had any experience at that time with the Kennedy family it would have been more exciting, because I believe that a couple of his sisters visiting Berlin wandered out of the city and were picked up for a few hours by the Russians.

SCAMMON: Just to make a parenthetic comment, was this the time that they drove to the wrong Frankfurt?

CLAY: That's right, and they were at that time with the Ambassador's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] two daughters, and so it was quite an exciting incident to us.

SCAMMON: Actually then, your contact with President Kennedy was limited to this first casual meeting with many other members of Congress in those hectic days in Berlin. There were no other contacts between you until after the election?

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CLAY: That is correct, in fact until after the Berlin Wall. When the Berlin Wall was erected, within a day or two thereafter, I wrote Max Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor], of course an old associate of mine, who was then in President Kennedy's office, (this was before he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) telling him that I thought the situation in Berlin was very serious and that I didn't know what I could do, but that I was prepared to leave my job and do anything that I could officially or publicly, or any other way, to help in the Berlin crisis if I could be of any service.

SCAMMON: This letter to General Taylor was just immediately after the Wall?

CLAY: Just immediately after the Wall. It was on the 15th of August. I got a telephone call from General Taylor almost immediately, telling me that he had shown my letter to the President, and that the President appreciated it very much and would be in touch with me. I didn't think much of it, but a few days later I got a telephone call asking me if I would come down to Washington to the White House for a conference. I can't tell you the exact date. I went down to the White House through the side entrance and went upstairs in the White House where the President came out and shook hands with me and said he would be with me in a few minutes. A few minutes later he took me into the upstairs study where he was assembled with President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk], Mr. Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen], Mr. Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], Mr. Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and Mr. Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger]. There may have been one or two others, but those were there.

SCAMMON: In the Oval Room?

CLAY: In the Oval Room. A decision had already been made to send Vice President Johnson to Berlin, although it had not been announced. The President asked me if I would accompany him, and I said, of course, that I would. He was to

leave the next day, as a matter of fact, and the conference was on the strategy of the Johnson visit and the speeches that he was to deliver. These speeches were in draft form and we all had an opportunity to go over them.

There were two other decisions that were made that night—the President made. I think the first had to do with the movement of reinforcements into Berlin. It had been decided—at least it had been discussed, the sending of an additional combat troop into Berlin. There were pros and cons on the question. The President did, I know, ask my views on it. I was very much in favor of it, and he decided at that conference that this would be done.

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It further was discussed as to the timing, and it was agreed, and the President decided at that conference, that every effort would be made to get this combat troop to arrive in Berlin so that the Vice President could greet it personally. This was a moot question, there were those who felt that this was adding unnecessary irritation and provocation. However, the President made the decision that this would be done, and I may add that it turned out to be a very important part of the Vice President's visit; one that attracted not only a great deal of attention throughout the world, but one that had a very real and convincing effect on the Berlin population of the importance of the Vice President's visit and all of its implications. I think it was a major part of the Vice President's visit, insuring its success, although it would have been successful otherwise.

SCAMMON: As you think back to that meeting in August, what was your impression of what the President's primary concerns and apprehensions and hopes were in terms of the Berlin situation, as he talked with you and your colleagues there? What impression did you get of him and the role he saw himself playing?

CLAY: Well, first, there was no mistake, at least in my thinking, that the President had already made up his mind that we were going to be firm in Berlin. Certainly that he hoped to display sufficient firmness to restore the morale of the West Berliners. Thirdly, that he hoped to convince the Russians that any further steps they took would be very dangerous.

I also felt that he did not want to go further than that at that time; that he did not want to take any action of an aggressive nature as to remove the Wall; that he hoped that the actions he would take would bring enough understanding to the Russians of the firmness of his position, so that we would not have any further retrogression of the Berlin situation.

SCAMMON: As you think back to this, was there any particular line of reasoning which seemed to you of particular appeal to the President, or which seemed particularly offensive to him as he listened to this discussion? I presume many viewpoints were presented.

CLAY: Well, I think that instinctively he discarded those ideas that might have been

considered aggressive in nature. One of those being whether or not the Vice President would fly in above the

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10,000 foot level which the Russians had rather arbitrarily assigned as the ceiling of the safety zone. He instinctively rejected that. He didn't like the idea. I think that, on the other hand, the idea of sending troops in on the established route which was a recognized route, but which by their presence would indicate a firmness of our intent, did appeal to him. So I would say that he was looking for measures which would show that he was firm in his intent but that he himself was not going to start any aggressive moves. In other words, it was a rather sober judgment of responsibilities that were involved. I would say that on the whole he was on middle ground amongst those that were advising him. There were many who would like to have been more aggressive, there were others who didn't think that even the sending of troops in could be regarded by the Russians as other than the hostile act.

SCAMMON: Did you get the impression that he really had reached this middle ground before this meeting and that the meeting itself was perhaps a detail in the position that he himself already had instinctively taken?

CLAY: I don't think so. I think that he was still open-minded at the conference. I don't think that there had been any fixing of positions by anybody really. This was more or less of a give and take discussion, an open session, and some of the suggestions that individuals made—they themselves would retreat from as the argument progressed. A second part of the discussion had to do with the internal political implications. As you know, Germany was then in a national campaign and it seemed almost certain that Chancellor Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer] would want to go into Berlin with the Vice President. It also seemed politically undesirable for the Vice President to go right into Berlin without at least paying a courtesy call on the Chancellor.

It was decided at that time that Vice President Johnson would stop and call on the Chancellor, but that we would have to very politely let the Chancellor know that this was an American visit and that he would not be asked to go along. As a matter of fact the task fell to Mr. Bohlen and myself to let the Chancellor know that he was not to go on this trip. It wasn't in any way intended to slight the Chancellor, but it was felt that this was the only way in which this trip could be made without it being interpreted as possibly being an invasion into the political campaign, which we wanted to avoid at all costs. So, this was another one of the strategies discussed and decided upon that night.

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The actual outline of the speeches which Mr. Johnson was to make—the formal speeches which Mr. Johnson was to make at the White House and at the Berlin Parliament—were decided upon that night, in fact, I believe, incorporated into final drafts, which the President approved before the Vice President departed. Of course, the Vice President made many informal speeches also, but these two had been written and formally approved. They

were very important, because one of those was when the Vice President used the words of our Declaration of Independence in which we pledged our lives, forces, and sacred honor, et cetera, as the position, which we held on Berlin. This had been endorsed by the President as a statement for the Vice President to make—which I think was very important because it was a restatement of our Berlin position, which I think, could not be misunderstood.

SCAMMON: Then you left with the Vice President the following day?

CLAY: I left with the Vice President the following day and attended him all through the trip and, of course, when we came back, I accompanied him when he made his official report to the President.

SCAMMON: Now, perhaps we might explore for a moment the circumstances under which you then were asked to return and stay on awhile longer in Berlin.

CLAY: Well, of course, this was a few days later. I had returned with the Vice President. I don't know whether the Vice President raised the question with him or how it developed, but within a few days I had a telephone call from the President asking me to go down to see him. I went down to see him and he said that in view of the situation in Berlin, particularly the morale of the people, that he would like very much for me to go back as his personal representative to demonstrate once more the seriousness with which he viewed entire Berlin situation. I agreed. In fact, he gave me a copy of a letter that night which asked me to go over to Berlin as his personal representative and to take charge of the Berlin situation, reporting directly to him. I made no comment on the particular letter.

Interestingly enough, when I went down a couple of days later to get it in draft form, it had been substantially changed. The letter as it was changed simply really made me an adviser. It did make it impossible for the Berlin Commandant [Albert William Watson], the Berlin

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political adviser [Howard Trivers], to take any action without my approval, but it did not establish a line responsibility. The President, when he gave me the letter, said, "I'm sorry this letter is not the way I wanted it, the way I originally wrote it, but this is the way the State Department feels it will have to be without cutting across all kinds of channels." I told the President that, "I think that in any situation, such as the situation that exists in Berlin, it is going to be very difficult no matter how it is done—all I want to do is to try and go over there and see what I can do to restore morale in the city, if it is easier for you for the letter to be written this way, it is all right with me."

SCAMMON: You feel that some of the more bureaucratic inclined people wanted to get into the arrangement?

CLAY: I'm sure the State Department people—I'm not too sure that the Defense

Department did also—but I'm sure that the State Department was terribly upset at the letter as it was originally drawn. It cut across our Ambassador to Germany [Walter C. Dowling]; and it cut across General Norstad [Lauris Norstad]. I'm not too sure that the results would have been any different, because I certainly would not have gone over there, even under the first letter, with any attempt to upset the applecart. In point of fact, the difficulties that did result, and there were many, I think would have resulted in either case. I recognize that any influence that I had on the situation was that of personal representative of the President, and that it would have only such values as would result from my ability to communicate directly with the President.

SCAMMON: On this arrangement that was undertaken in Berlin—did you feel in the months you were there, General Clay, that the absence of a stronger letter had weakened your position, vis-à-vis the President, not vis-à-vis the military or the State Department, but vis-à-vis the President?

CLAY: No, I don't think so. I do believe that the command set up was a very complicated one, and that with the Berlin situation as tight as it was, having to go through an Ambassador and Bonn [capital of West Germany, 1949-1990] to reach the State Department, and having to go through a commanding general in Germany to reach Norstad, who was the Commandant at N.A.T.O., and then to the Defense Department, did create such delays that it would have been very difficult had a crisis developed to have had immediate results. Having the ability to pick up the

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telephone and call to the President, I felt that I could break through that kind of a situation should the necessity arise. And, in fact, in October, when there was a tight confrontation, I did break through and get to the President.

SCAMMON: Were there many occasions, other than this one you cited, when you found it helpful or useful to talk directly to the President by phone?

CLAY: Well, actually he called me more often than I called him. I had learned long ago that the right to call the President was one not to abuse and that if you called too often your voice loses its value, so it really had to be a pretty serious matter before I called the President. On several occasions he did call me. In point of fact, the tight confrontation which resulted from the East German effort to close the border except to Allied personnel unless they showed passports, which was a direct violation of the agreements, was thought directly in Berlin to prove that it was the Russians that were doing this, not East Germany. While this doesn't seem very important technically to us back here, it was of tremendous importance to our position in Berlin that we did not let the East German government force us to show passports.

This show of military strength on our part, even taking the political adviser through by bayonet point, was basically designed to bring out the Russians. If we could bring out the

Russians and show that this was a Russian maneuver we had accomplished our purpose insofar as the morale of the Berliner was concerned. Moreover, it destroyed the myth that the Russians were trying to propagate that this Wall had been erected by East Germans; that it was not a Russian action at all. So, this particular night, after we had brought our political adviser through the gates, we brought up a couple of armored cars and this was almost immediately followed by Russian tanks beginning to show up at which time we brought up our tanks and to the outside world it looked like a very exciting thing—ten Russian tanks on one side of the Wall and a hundred yards away on the American side ten American tanks lined up with their guns pointing directly at each other.

SCAMMON: But, Russian tanks, not East German tanks?

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CLAY: Russian tanks not East German tanks, and obviously they were not willing to trust the East Germans in this situation. At that particular moment, I was no longer concerned. The Russians had come out and I was sure they were not going to do anything, but nevertheless, as we were sitting down there in the command room in Berlin, 11:00 or 12:00 o'clock Berlin time, so it must have been 3:00 or 4:00 o'clock in the morning in Washington, I was called to the telephone to say that Mr. Bundy wanted to speak to me. I went to the telephone to speak to Mr. Bundy. When I heard the voice I knew immediately that it was the President on the other side of the phone.

By this time he had received the A.P. [Associated Press] news dispatches and whatnot, and so he had called me. I explained the situation to him and I told him that I thought we had reached a stalemate and that we had accomplished our purpose and that there wasn't to be anything more to it, and that I rather expected that the Russians would withdraw fairly soon.

About that time, they handed me a slip that said there were 20 more Russian tanks coming up, so I said to the President: "There is a variation, Mr. President, there are 20 more Russian tanks coming up, this proves they are good mathematicians." He said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, we have 30 tanks in Berlin, so they brought up 20 more tanks so that they will have a tank for every tank that we have," and that, "this was further evidence to me that they don't intend to do anything." And he said to that, "Well, I'm glad of that, I know you people over there haven't lost your nerves." I said, "Mr. President, we're not worried about our nerves, we're worrying about those of you people in Washington." He said, "I don't know about those of my associates, but mine are all right."

SCAMMON: What impression did you get of the situation here in Washington? I'm personally intrigued by this, General, because it reminds me of the time when you were in Berlin during the airlift, when Berliners, both American and German, had a stronger will than some of the people back in Washington—in 1948. Did you get that same feeling when you were there during the Wall crisis at the checkpoint, that the President himself had stronger nerves than some of his associates?

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CLAY: I had very distinct feeling that the President had greater resolution than many of his associates, but above all, I was sure that he was not going to let the situation deteriorate if it developed to a point where it looked like it was really deteriorating while he waited for the interminable seeking of Allied agreement, and I think that perhaps here was the biggest feel—the British and French were very reluctant to do anything in Berlin. As a matter of fact, they were very reluctant to do anything on the whole German situation at that particular time, but they were extremely reluctant to move in Berlin, and they were having these daily ambassadorial conferences in the State Department with the French and British Ambassadors—occasionally the West German Ambassador [Wilhelm Grewe]—with our present Ambassador to Russia, who was then Assistant Secretary Kohler [Foy D. Kohler]. They were expressing all of these doubts which had a very real effect on the State Department. They were always slowing the State Department up in making decisions.

I think the President was fully conscious of this and was much more ready to make decisions even if they didn't approve than the State Department itself would have been. Unfortunately, perhaps, this applied even more to the military situation because this was a N.A.T.O. [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] problem. There was no direct communication between our American Commander and the Defense Department on this matter. It all had to go through General Norstad, and General Norstad was leaning over backward to try to reflect a N.A.T.O. viewpoint rather than an American viewpoint. So, almost all the recommendations from N.A.T.O. were held up or slow or were waiting word from other governments rather than positive recommendations. So the President was cognizant of the fact that these Allied discussions and negotiations were keeping him from getting positive recommendations.

SCAMMON: But your feeling was, at least from your conversations with him and other Communications, that his own purpose was very clear and precise, that he was prepared, if necessary, to cut through these delaying devices which were inherent in the operation, to take whatever steps he thought might be required; that he was more concerned over Berlin than he was over the Allied relationships. Would that be a fair assumption?

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CLAY: Yes. I think that I had complete confidence that in a real emergency we would get approval from the President to act. He might differ as to whether or not it was a real emergency, but if he were convinced that it was a real emergency, I have no doubts whatsoever in my mind that he would act.

Actually, in the whole time that I was there I had his support on all of my recommendations with the exception of one. At the time that the Russians began to buzz our airplanes and were doing this several times a day in the air corridors, I wanted to do two things. I wanted to put on a daily run of fighter airplanes into Berlin, and I wanted to start flying over the 10,000 foot limit. The latter I felt essential, really, to the long-range survival of Berlin, that if it is going to be a great city capable of receiving jet airplanes, sooner or later this 10,000 foot limitation has got to be destroyed. This seemed to me the right time and

place to destroy it. We did have fighter missions set up ready to go, but we never sent them. I felt that it would be more convincing if we did send the fighter airplanes. General Norstad was very much opposed to this. He didn't want to do either. He didn't believe in it.

SCAMMON: Did you feel he was speaking in this sense personally, or on behalf of his N.A.T.O. command?

CLAY: I think he was expressing more what he felt was the sentiments of the N.A.T.O. countries than he was his own personal sentiments. Moreover, he had no actual connection with the Berlin situation, because as NATO commander he held very strongly to the conviction that he should never visit Berlin. He hadn't been there. He hadn't maybe been bitten by the bug that gives you the Berlin fever. The result was, and perhaps he was looking at it much more objectively, but anyway the results were that he was opposed to these two movements.

Actually, it became quite clear to me within a very short time thereafter that the Russians were retreating from this position. That our action in flying military plans through even though they were unarmed, but in continuing to fly them, that the assembly of fighter planes ready to move, or perhaps a change in some internal situation in Russia, led the Russians to give up their harassments without any more aggressive action on our part.

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When this happened, and long before it had been recognized, I wrote the President and told him that in my opinion the Russians were retreating, that I felt that the continued harassments in Berlin were at an end for a long time to come, and that we could have a very substantial period of peace and quiet, and that I had to admit that Norstad's recommendations had sufficed to bring this about.

I got a telephone call from the President thanking me very much for the letter. I think perhaps some of his people had always felt that I was going to make an issue out of it somehow or another publicly, which, of course, I have no intention of doing. I did write the letter deliberately because, while I still would have liked to have seen us do the other things, I did want to go on record that what had been done had accomplished the purposes for which it was intended to accomplish.

In point of fact, it was about that time, having felt that the main crisis was over (it was around Christmastime really), I wrote the President and told him that I felt that it was time for me to come home. Obviously unless there was something going on in Berlin, my job over there—there was no job—and it became a little bit monotonous. As long as there was tension and excitement, there was plenty to do, but when it ceased, the routine came in and there wasn't anything much to do. But, he called me on the telephone immediately thereafter and said he appreciated the fact that things had quieted down and that I was probably right, that they were going to quiet down, but that he would be most appreciative if I would stay on a few months longer to be sure that things had quieted down before I returned. Of course, I told him immediately that I had gone over there to be helpful and I wasn't going to leave as long as he thought I was helpful and that I would stay a few months longer, but I did want him to

realize that if things were quiet over there that there would be no purpose in my being there and that I could accomplish it by trips back and forth.

He wrote me in March and said he was sending General Taylor over to see me. General Taylor did come over and talked to me about whether there was any use in me staying any further and I told him that I was convinced that it wasn't and gave him a letter to the President resigning, which the President received and then wrote me to come home and talk to him about it, that he wanted to figure out a way of doing it that wouldn't be of alarm to people in Berlin.

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Then, we had the talk and I was to go back and tell Willy Brandt about it quietly, and we were to make an announcement that in about three weeks or a month I was returning home if things continued quiet. Brandt was going to have the opportunity to tell the Berlin people about it, but that day one of these errors came up which so frequently come up at press conferences. Somebody asked the President about it and he announced that I had resigned before I had even gotten back to Berlin. So, I was confronted when I got back to Berlin by Brandt, and all of these people wondered why I had done this without letting them know. It was a little bit embarrassing, the President told me that he hadn't meant to do it, that he was very sorry, but nevertheless, he had done it and that was all there was to that.

SCAMMON: During all this time that you were in Berlin, was there any serious discussion either at that first meeting in the Oval Room in August or right up until the time you returned, was there any serious discussion of an attempt to break the Wall, to destroy the Wall? Did the President have any particular views on this question that would be useful?

CLAY: I don't know that I discussed it with the President before I went to Berlin. After I had been in Berlin about a month and wrote him of its problems, I wrote him then that I thought it was much too late for us to do anything about the Wall; that it had become such an issue that I did not believe that we could tear the Wall down then without armed conflict. I think we might have been able to have stopped the Wall from having been built that night. Unfortunately, due to the long chain of command indecisions involved in trying to get Allied agreement, even the indecision in Brandt's mind itself, led to no positive recommendations, and by the time all of this reached the President, in my opinion, it was already too late. This was the place where if the Commandant in Berlin had acted, even if he had been in violation of his instructions, he would have succeeded and he would have been forgiven and he would have become a very great man. All he had to do, in my opinion that night, was to have run trucks up and down the street unarmed—unarmed soldiers in the trucks, and we never would have had a war. But you got to do those things at the right timing, because it was a cause célèbre a month later, and I just can't believe that the Russians could have allowed us to go in there and torn that wall down without bringing up troops. Then, if they had brought troops up—what would you do? You would either stop—which would be the worst thing you could do or, you'd start shooting—so, in my opinion we had missed the timing on tearing the Wall down.

SCAMMON: This was not discussed in that meeting you had with the President and his colleagues?

CLAY: Not at that particular time, but I did discuss it with the President on one or two of my trips home. Then I didn't raise the question of taking the Wall down, because I felt it was too late, so it was never one of my recommendations. I did recommend the continuing location of troops so that we would maintain convoys on the highways at all times.

SCAMMON: That is still being done?

CLAY: That is still being done. I did also start the military patrols when the East Germans began to arrest our people. This stopped the arrests. We stopped the patrols. But, these are the type and kind of things that have to be done on the ground and when I did them on every occasion the President supported me in them. As I said, our only real difference was on this question of what we did versus the harassments on the airlines, and there he did. I approved and was in favor of what Norstad wanted to do—I wanted to go further.

SCAMMON: I would be correct in assuming that the President himself made the decision on this?

CLAY: Oh, yes. The President made the decision, and he wrote me a letter explaining why he made the decision, which was that he didn't want to go further until he found out what he was doing was going to be enough.

SCAMMON: And, when you came back in the spring of 1962, did you have any further sessions with the President about Berlin?

CLAY: Not immediately. I had seen him just a few days before I returned home, you see. I came back and resigned. When I returned home I wrote him a letter and told him that I had nothing further to report, that I was, of course, available if he wanted to see me, but that I had no reason to come down to see him unless he had something. I, of course, got a very nice letter back from him, but I did not see him at that time.

Now, over the few months that intervened, he called me a couple of times about Berlin matters, none of which were particularly important, but nevertheless he called to get my views on them, which I gave him over the telephone. The next time I heard from him was just before the Cuba crisis when he called me up and said that he was afraid that Mr. Khrushchev [Nikitia Sergeyevich Khrushchev] was getting sticky and said

that he was going to give him an ultimatum that day with respect to the taking of the missile bases out of Cuba.

SCAMMON: If I may interrupt, was this the first time that you had been asked by the President, or involved with the President in anything except Berlin?

CLAY: In anything except Berlin, yes. Except, I'll go back to one other episode simply for the record, and all he said to me then was that I hope over the next five or six days you'll be around where I need you I can get you. That was all that transpired at the time. As a matter of fact, I was going to Spain on a shooting trip which I had to call off. I found out subsequently he called Jack McCloy, who was in Europe and asked him to come home to be around for the next four or five days, but that was all there was to that.

The only incident that occurred was that on one of my visits when he asked me to come back to see him about was right during the steel episode and he was greatly concerned about that and, of course, he knew that I had been the head of a company that was a large user of steel and he simply asked me whom he could get in touch with in the steel industry that he might be able to sit down with off the record and talk quietly about to see if he couldn't get some reason and control of the situation. Whether anything came of that I don't know, but it was certain that at that moment his mind was very concerned with the steel situation.

SCAMMON: That was the only conversation except on Berlin until this matter of potential difficulty in Cuba?

CLAY: Yes. I think that that is by and large true, although my several visits with him—he had a mind that ranged over many things very rapidly, he might make a comment about the economy or might ask my opinion as to the economy, and often did. They were just discussions though and not major and important conferences. I suppose that—I think that I made three or four visits back home, all of which were at his request, during the period that I was in Berlin, and ordinarily I would have anywhere from 45 to 50 minutes with him to bring him up to date with the Berlin situation.

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SCAMMON: Was your feeling in working with President Kennedy that he did make an effort to compartmentalize his dealings with people; that he would regard you, for example, as primarily a Berlin person, and that these were asides rather than an effort really to wide-range a conversation?

CLAY: Well, I think that, as I've said earlier, the President had a very broad ranging mind and even asides were questions that added to his concept of whatever he happened to be thinking about at the moment. Certainly we would talk

personalities at times, never critically and derogatorily, but nevertheless, we talked personalities at times. I don't know how to answer your question any more directly than that.

He was a very stimulating man to talk with. He had a brilliant mind, he listened well, he asked pointed questions and it was exhilarating to be with him because you don't run into that type of mind too often.

SCAMMON: You had a feeling that he was on top of a particular situation that he was dealing with. You had no sense of any inadequacy or lack of information or groping?

CLAY: I never met with him on any subject that he hadn't done his homework before the meeting. He was always well informed on the subject that he was meeting you about. This was true not only in the Berlin situation, but later when I was working with him on foreign aid. He always did his homework before he sat up a meeting. How he found time to do it, I don't know—but he did it.

SCAMMON: Let's return now—you mentioned the postponement of the shooting trip to Spain. Did anything further come about the Cuban thing?

CLAY: No. Well, the crisis passed over. Mr. Khrushchev accepted the ultimatum and that was all over.

SCAMMON: After the Cuban arrangement you did have some working with the Kennedy people on the ransom of the Bay of Pigs?

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CLAY: Yes, although the President didn't really come into that directly. This was on Christmas Eve. I was on my way to Washington to spend Christmas Eve with my family, and I got a call at the airport from Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy]—from Robert Kennedy in which he told me that this whole deal was stopped in the middle of the return of the prisoners, with about half of them back, because the Cuban government insisted that the Cubans who had left Cuba would promise \$2,900,000 for the return of those wounded at the Bay of Pigs, would not go any further unless they paid the \$2,900,000. I told him as soon as I reached Washington I would go to his office, and there I got into quite a chain of events. Almost before I knew I signed a note for the \$2,900,000 and we had arranged for its transfer through a Canadian Bank to a Canadian Bank in Cuba, and at 5 o'clock that afternoon, the Cubans had the draft and before the end of the day all of the prisoners had been returned. All I had to do then was to raise the \$2,900,000. Well, instead of spending Christmas eve with my grandchildren, I left the Department of Justice about 6:00—6:30 that night. By that time I had found out I couldn't reach any more of the people that I was trying to reach to raise some money because they were all gone somewhere for Christmas. Anyway, about 3:00 or 4:00 o'clock Christmas afternoon I got a telephone call at my son's house. It was President Kennedy on the phone just to thank me for having taken on this responsibility.

SCAMMON: But this arrangement of the ransom of the prisoners from the Bay of Pigs was only incidentally in connection with President Kennedy?

CLAY: If the President was involved in it in anyway whatsoever, I didn't know anything about it. I got into it purely with Robert Kennedy and after I got to the Department of Justice then he didn't participate in it any more. I took it on.

SCAMMON: Then, after this Christmas arrangement on the Bay of Pigs, you had other connections with the President before the foreign aid request?

CLAY: Yes, but only in a social sense. Whenever Brandt would visit over here, or the Chancellor, and the President would have a luncheon or dinner, why, of course, he was always very kind and would invite me to attend. But I had no other...

SCAMMON: Did you go back at all to Berlin during this time for him?

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CLAY: I went back on the 4th of July in 1962, which I had promised Brandt I would do when I left. Just before I left I got a letter from the President stating that to please feel that I was going back as his personal representative, and to please convey to Brandt and people of Berlin his greetings, and so on. How he knew I was going, I don't know.

SCAMMON: This was entirely a personal arrangement with Brandt?

CLAY: Yes.

SCAMMON: Actually, after your return in the Spring of 1962 from Berlin, there was very little, save the social contact, with the President on that particular matter of Berlin?

CLAY: Very little. As I say, during that period he called me a couple of times, but they were on relatively unimportant Berlin matters. I think he primarily did it just to let me know that he still considered that I was an adviser on Berlin. I don't think that anything happened at Berlin of any major consequence during that period.

SCAMMON: Then your next connections, General Clay, with the President after the very brief arrangements at Christmastime with Bobby Kennedy on Cuba, were these next ones the foreign aid commitments?

CLAY: Yes.

SCAMMON: How did that develop?

CLAY: Well, the President called me. I think it was probably in November, 1962. He asked me to come down to see him. I went down to see him and he told me that he was very much concerned with the foreign aid program; that he knew there was a great deal of opposition to it in the Congress; and that he thought he was going to have a great deal of difficulty in getting it through. He would like to have it really examined carefully by a group in which he felt that the Congress might have some confidence, and that once they had made their findings would feel that they could support what they had found, whatever it was. I agreed that I would undertake the job and we sat down to figure out who to put on the committee.

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We tried to pick people who had some basic knowledge of foreign aid. Primarily to save time, which accounted of course perhaps for the heavily Republican composition of the committee, although I don't think that they were Republican in the partisan sense, because we had to rely on the previous eight years to get men that had had experience in this. Which led, of course, to Robert Anderson [Robert B. Anderson] and Herman Phleger being on the committee. We brought in Gene Black [Eugene R. Black] because he was retiring as chairman of the International Bank and had obviously had a great deal of experience. We brought in the chancellor of the university who had participated in the educational program abroad. We brought in a retired Harvard Dean, who had actually been a foreign aid representative in Asia. We brought in the head [George Meany] of the C.I.O./A.F.L [Congress of Industrial Organizations and American Federation of Labor] who because of the interest of labor had always had an interest in the program, and we brought in Dr. Rusk—I think as really a personal selection on the friendship basis with the President, although he too had had experience in rehabilitation work in foreign countries. When we had formed this Committee, we then set up proceedings.

I told the President that I know the people we are putting on this committee are all in favor of foreign aid—they realize that it is an essential part of our foreign policy, and is in our best national interests. But, I said that I couldn't say any more beyond that, because I think that in many ways they are going to be very critical of what has been done and what is being done and they may have differences on the amounts that are involved. I feel confident that men like we have on this committee, and this also included Mr. Lovett [Robert Abercrombie Lovett], who had had a great deal of experience with it, that the men on this committee would conscientiously examine the program as they recommended it. The President agreed to this.

We received our reports on foreign aid, we heard all of the State Department representatives who are in charge of the various areas; we heard from several of the Ambassadors, and made, I think, a very objective analysis of the whole foreign aid program. The report did come up that a dissent from Mr. Meany, unanimously from the rest of the Committee, which did point out certain inherent weaknesses, things which we felt should be

cured, and that if they were cured, would enable us to accomplish the same purpose with substantially decreased expenditures.

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After we had written the report in draft form, I told the committee that I would like very much to send the report over to the President in draft form and to get his reaction—even whether we followed them or not—that I didn't want to confront him with a report that he had had no opportunity to read or to comment on. There was some disagreement about this, but the committee finally did agree. So we did send a rough draft report, through Mr. Bell [David E. Bell], over to the President. Some of the wording of the report which he felt a little harsh, he called me over, and I went over it with him. Finally, I suggested, and he agreed, that we get Mr. Bundy to come over and appear before the committee with suggestions as to how we might alter or change the language, not the substance; that we were not in any way trying to add to his difficulties, and that we would be very happy indeed to have this kind of advice from Mr. Bundy. Mr. Bundy did come over and spend several hours with the committee and in general we altered the wording of the report to meet the problems which worried the President. With that we wrote the report up and turned it in to the President.

After the report had been published and the bill was before Congress, he asked for the support of our committee. He felt that what Mr. Bell was doing and what he had set out to do was in keeping with our recommendations, and so did I. We did have a disagreement, and now this is something that somebody else may decide ought not to go in there, but we did have a disagreement on the amount of money that was involved. The President had gone up for \$4 million and 6, we felt that about \$3 million and 9 was the maximum that should be requested.

SCAMMON: You mean \$4 billion?

CLAY: Yes. Did I say \$4 million? Anyway, the President's request went up for \$4 Billion, 600 million, and this was some \$700 million higher than we felt that the bill should be and I told the President that I simply couldn't go up there and testify and support a 4.6 sum. He said, "I'm not expecting to get 4. 6, but I know what's going to happen to this in one of the committees, and I've got to make my fight for some 5 or 600 million dollars more than I'm going to get, because this committee lives on the credit it gets from cutting appropriations, and no matter how meritorious my proposal may be, if I don't put 5 or 600 million more in there than I expect to get, I'll not only get what I asked for, but I won't get what I expected to get." I argued against him on this. I said, I think that if we can go up there and with this committee supporting wholeheartedly the whole program in a substantially

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reduced amount, we will have a much better chance in getting it through than we will this way. He did not agree with me, and so I compromised with him by saying that, well we can add \$300 million to what we think, to show that the money is available for the Alliance for

Progress if it can use it. I said, "I know it can't use it and that you don't really need the money, but this would enable me to go up there and testify for \$4.2 not \$4.6, and this is as far as I can go." He expressed himself as quite satisfied with that, and this is what I tried to do. It got out of the Senate in the authorization; it got cut in the House authorization. This was much more in the authorization bill at the time than in the appropriation bill which came later.

SCAMMON: Did you have any contact with the President between the time of your original discussion with him and the discussion of the draft report? Did you discuss with him the work of the committee while it was working, or...

CLAY: Yes, I visited him with Dave Bell at least a couple of times during the progress of the report, to tell him how we were approaching it, what we were doing, and what we were finding out. Now Dave Bell the administrator, had at our request sat with us in all our hearings. He had opportunity to comment on any and every item that went into the report, but basically he agreed with the report and was in favor of it, and he told the President that he was in favor of it, and the President accepted that. Where his real difference came in was what he thought he could do with the Congress.

SCAMMON: Political judgment?

CLAY: Political judgment rather than on the report itself.

SCAMMON: Let me ask a question here which may seem blunt, General Clay, and I know you'll forgive it. Why do you think he approached you on this? Your work in Berlin was known to everyone. Why do you think on foreign aid? Was it perhaps the background in manufacturing and banking, would that have been the reason, or the fact that you were not a Democrat....

CLAY: Well, I think there were two or three reasons involved. Perhaps as I look back at it, he never expressed himself as to why, but I suspect that he felt that I was an Eisenhower Republican [Dwight D. Eisenhower], that this would help perhaps with the Republican Party, that I was certainly accepted in the country as one who recognized the effects of Communism and that foreign aid in particular, in at least one-third of its expenditures, was directly committed to prevent Communist penetration. Perhaps he felt that the public had some confidence in me.

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SCAMMON: He never discussed with you any particular reasons he felt other than general competence on your contribution to the work of foreign trade?

CLAY: No. It never occurred to me, because I've been asked by presidents to do these things, and I've always said yes. I guess I'm completely unable to say no to a president. I never ask the reason why.

SCAMMON: These are just speculations?

CLAY: Just speculation, even in my own mind. Now, of course, the last experience I had with the President was when he made his trip to Berlin.

SCAMMON: That was in the summer of 1963?

CLAY: Yes. Before he made the trip—several weeks before he made the trip—he called me and told me he was going on the trip. He said that there had been many of his advisers that were opposed to it, and what did I think about it. I said, “Well, Mr. President, I think that there can’t be anything more important to people of Berlin and to the people of Europe than the fact that you would visit Berlin.” I said, however, “I would not, as much as I would like to see it, I would not recommend it. Not for the political situation, but I think that there is an element of risk in it, and that if I were in command over there I would be urging you not to come. I wouldn’t want the responsibility for your visit.” After all that, I thought about that at the time of the Dallas episode, where in this exposed position he came through without any incident of any kind, and then this happened where you would have least expected it to have happened. But, if I had been in Berlin at the time, as much as I would have been honored and appreciated the importance of the President’s visit, I would have hesitated very definitely to have taken the risk of having him there.

SCAMMON: When you were there with him, how did you see him? That is, was he moved—was he unmoved? What was his reaction?

CLAY: Well, when he called me and invited me and Mrs. Clay [Marjorie McKeown Clay] to join him, for the full trip, I felt very strongly that I had no business on the full trip with the President, but I did want to go to Berlin with him, so I asked him if I could join him at Wiesbaden, just before the Berlin trip, which I did. That morning we were riding out to Berlin in the airplane—he came up to sit with me, and, of course, he was quite pleased and really overwhelmed with the

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reception he had gotten down in West Germany, and I told him then, I said, “You haven’t had any reception yet, you just wait until you get to Berlin you’re going to see something that you’ve never really seen before.” Of course, he did, he was obviously very much touched about it, and I’m sure that he adlibbed his famous, “I am a Berliner.”

SCAMMON: Yes, it was not in the draft?

CLAY: No. This was in response to this overwhelming welcome that he had received. Of course, in every way it was a most successful visit. I told him goodbye at the airplane when he went off to Ireland. That was my last time I saw him.

SCAMMON: You had no contact with him between the discussions about testifying on the aid bill and the invitation for Mrs. Clay and yourself to join him on the trip to Europe?

CLAY: Not about the trip. Well, I think by the time he called me on the trip, the aid bill had pretty well gotten through its testimonies and hearings, and it was sort of a past issue and my next visit and experience with him was simply his courtesy in inviting me to go on this trip to Berlin with him.

SCAMMON: And when you said goodbye to him at the airport that was the last time you had contact with him?

CLAY: Yes.

SCAMMON: Let me ask you, if I may, another kind of question, General Clay. Let's assume that the assassin's [Lee Harvey Oswald] bullet had never struck down the President, that he was still alive. Based on your work with him in these various fields, how do you think he would have developed in the period from November 1963, or when you last saw him in Berlin, up to, say through this year?

CLAY: Well, I've got to pass. I would have to answer that question in two different ways. Let me say this, as a man, you could not help but respect, admire and have a very deep affection for President Kennedy. He was always courteous—he listened, if he didn't agree with you, he explained why he did disagree with you and in every respect it was a privilege and a pleasure to work for him, to be associated with him in any capacity. So, as a man, my respect for him was tremendous.

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As a President, I felt completely confident in his dedication to his job and in the fact that as he accumulated more and more background information he was more penetrating in his questions and more perceptive of the answers. In other words, he was showing a tremendous ability to grow. Of course, as President, I think it would be foolish for anyone to attempt to analyze at this time really what his position was. In fact, I think that he had not fully completed his process of learning and growing. I suspect that if he had any difficulties as President, it came from lack of experience in administration. I never felt personally, clearly whom to go to when I wanted to go to somebody less than the President to get an answer because I didn't want to bother him.

SCAMMON: How would you contrast this with your own experience, say with the previous eight years of the administration?

CLAY: Well, you know Eisenhower, above all, was a good administrator. He delegated authority, and you usually knew where it was. On the other hand,

General Eisenhower was what he was, he was a product of his own experience which was broad and had been accumulated over many years, whereas I've said President Kennedy was growing, growing very fast in greatness.

SCAMMON: As you look back upon the three years and some days of the Kennedy Administration and your particular connections with him in the various fields, would you see anything that you would say were, or let me put it in another way, what would you think in the areas which you know of, were the greatest accomplishments, and, if you will, any defeats which were suffered by the Administration, and the President's reaction to these accomplishments and defeats, particularly these areas of Berlin and foreign aid.

CLAY: Well, I think that you would have to, if you were looking at this with a broad brush, you would say that in allowing the Wall to be built we lost on the whole more than we gained by our firm start after it was built. There was a slight deterioration of our position as a result of the Wall having been built, there is no question about that. I think that there was a continued deterioration in our relations with our European allies, primarily due to the change of government in France. I don't think that anyone could have avoided this, but whether President Kennedy could have stopped it and reversed it or not, I don't know. I think he improved our position in Southeast Asia by firmness, he certainly improved our image of friendliness; our desire to be friends with all of the free people. I would say that in personality and in the confidence which he engendered around the world he improved the American image, but at the same time our position somewhat deteriorated.

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SCAMMON: We looked better even though we may not have been as strong as we were before?

CLAY: That's right. I think this process of deterioration though was an inevitable one. I think the great prestige which had developed from huge efforts in foreign aid in Europe and creating the various collective security alliances was doomed to go down as we accomplished our purpose in restoring the pride and strength to these countries to which we were giving assistance. I feel very strongly that we are going to have to reexamine what our relations are to the Free World, to all of these alliances where we have taken the lead for so long, where we have played the major part and where we have let others believe that we will continue to play the major part. I suspect that all of this was, in fact, I am confident that much of this was going on in President Kennedy's mind, but it did not crystallize at the time of his unfortunate death. It did not crystallize in a plan of action. But, I just know from his talks, that he knew there were things that had to be done if our foreign policy were to be successful.

SCAMMON: In terms of an oral history project like this, General Clay, if you were to take a few seconds to sum up your impression of President Kennedy, other than what

you've already said, what might you add?

CLAY: I think that the one thing that I would add is that there was no question in my mind at any time but that he was a natural leader.

SCAMMON: This is a feeling you will take onward of him as a person?

CLAY: Yes. Outside of the fact that he was President, I would have been glad to have been associated, to work with him in any endeavor.

SCAMMON: Business, teaching, whatever it might be?

CLAY: Yes.

SCAMMON: Is there anything else we should add to what we have just said?

CLAY: Well, I've sort of hit the high spots, because, as I said, I kept no diary, and these relations existed over a period of time—many of them by telephone, by letter, by cable...

SCAMMON: Many of the letters, of course, and correspondence will probably be made available later, won't they?

CLAY: Yes, I'm sure they will.

SCAMMON: This is Richard Scammon with General Lucius B. Clay, Wednesday, July 1, 1964 in General Clay's office with Lehman Brothers, New York City.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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