

Thomas S. Power Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 12/01/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Thomas S. Power (1905-1970) was a General in the United States Air Force from 1957 to 1964, the Commander in Chief of Strategic Air Command at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska from 1957 to 1964, and Director of Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff from 1960 to 1964. This interview focuses on concerns about a missile gap during the Kennedy administration, the use of air surveillance to gather intelligence, and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Thomas S. Power

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Oral History Interview

With

THOMAS S. POWER

December 1, 1964
Vietnam

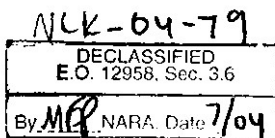
By Daniel Ellsberg

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ELLSBERG: General Power, perhaps the best way to start is if you could say briefly what the occasion was of your first meeting with President Kennedy.

POWER: Well, my first meeting with President Kennedy was at Offutt Air Force Base when he was a candidate for the office of president--he was running for office. He came out with Senator Symington [W. Stuart Symington] and Senator Jackson [Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson] to get a briefing on the Strategic Air Command which I gave him. Of course, there was a question period and the inevitable question at that time was the missile gap. What our [Inaudible] status was. As I said, I briefed him on SAC but I must admit that in answering the questions we were restricted because I had received a telephone call from the Secretary of the Air Force, Dudley C. Sharp, in which he issued an order to me that I would not discuss any war plans, would not discuss intelligence, nor would I discuss any controversial or sensitive matters. Naturally, this made my answers seem rather bland, and, as a matter of fact, Senator Symington chided me about it. Of course, there was nothing I could say except to comply with this order.

ELLSBERG: You weren't able to tell them?



POWER: No, I did not tell them at that time that I had received this restriction. I had received this order from my superiors and I was merely complying with it. It was my understanding that General White [Thomas D. White], Chief of Staff of the Air Force, after President Kennedy was elected did inform him about this restriction so that he would not get the idea that we were completely stupid in Omaha.

ELLSBERG: And want his memory of the Commander of SAC to be that. Do you remember his reaction at the time and any questions he seemed to be interested in?

POWER: He seemed very understanding to me, particularly Senator Jackson--he understood the situation and as a matter of fact in the automobile driving down to the airplane he said to the candidate, Senator Kennedy, "I am sure you understand the position General Power is in not discussing these matters." President Kennedy said, "I understand perfectly and I'll be seeing you."

ELLSBERG: We might come back to this: what was the state of the discussion at that time? First, do you remember when it was in the campaign?

POWER: It was about the middle of the campaign I would say, not in the latter stages of it.

ELLSBERG: But he would have been interested in learning from you whether he was completely out of line regarding some missile gap?

POWER: It was obvious from Senator Symington's question that they were interested in trying to establish the point that there was a missile gap and that we did have greater problems.

ELLSBERG: When did you next--perhaps we can come back to these things--but if you will just briefly outline the various occasions when you remember having dealt with him: by the way, not only in person but in writing.

POWER: I am sure that you appreciate that a Field Commander has little personal contact with the President. His contacts are through the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or the Secretary of Defense. However, I did have occasion to personally hold conversations with President Kennedy and I believe this was in the Fall of 1961. Now, at that time I felt deeply concerned about the missile gap or about the relative strengths of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet programs and numbers of missiles, etc. I felt that we did not have enough hard Intelligence to make accurate assessments and I felt very strongly that an accurate assessment of the threat is vital in order to prepare an adequate [Inaudible] missile program to affect the threat. I went to see him--mind you now, this was after the Powers' [Francis Gary Powers] incident--after he had been shot down and everybody was in

a state of, well I might almost use the word “shamed” that we had been caught doing this dastardly deed. Now to me I could not quite understand this. People have known since time immemorial that Intelligence is a vital function of the security of any nation, that you must have Intelligence on your potential enemy. This is an essential fact of life and I was rather amazed at the naïve reaction as though this was something that we were the only ones in the world who had ever done this.

ELLSBERG: This was back in May 1960?

POWER: No. But we were still suffering from that humiliation that caused us to get into that very sensitive state. And of course they stopped this type of flight. Now my only purpose in going to see the president was to urge him to resume these flights; that we must have Intelligence if we’re to take proper measures to safeguard the security of this nation, even though that might involve some political unpleasantness. I had to, in order to establish the point, give him my estimate of the threat which varied greatly from the national estimates. Now my estimate was not one that I said, “I know that this is right, or that it is based on this fact or that,” because as I said before there was not enough hard Intelligence to make this type of an authoritative statement. Mine had to be based on hypothetical assumptions, my background, my knowledge--granted it is in a narrow field--it is in a field dealing with war, dealing with strategic war. Well, I told him that I thought that if I was running the Soviet Union that I would have had a much bigger missile program than they are being given credit for.

We don’t know this is true, but I feel that it is vital we find out. I gave him some figures which more than doubled or tripled what the NIE [National Intelligence Estimate] estimates were, and I can remember his remark to me, he said: “Nobody else agrees with you, not even your own chief of staff agrees with you, nor the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” I also remember my remark to him. I said, “That’s right, Mr. President, but that does not necessarily mean that I am wrong, and my proposal is let’s find out and let’s make sure that we’re right because this whole survival of this nation depends on it.” My impression in talking to him was that I could see this was not something that he instinctively agreed with me. In other words, he listened with great interest and he was far from convinced that I was wrong. As a matter of fact, he instructed General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer], General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor], who were both present, to have the Joint Chiefs of Staff give him an estimate of the threat. And in parting he said, “And I would like to have General Power submit his estimate separately.” Now this I did, this could be a very historical paper--I don’t know where it is, but my estimate of the intentions of the potential military threat of the Soviet [Inaudible]. I don’t want to [Inaudible].

ELLSBERG: Do you remember when this was, was it in October would you say?

POWER: I can get the definite date for you from my archives. However, I believe it was sometime in the latter part of ’61.

ELLSBERG: It is after the new NIE came out--at the end of September.

POWER: Yes, it was, I think, about to be published or had just been published.

ELLSBERG: Now, this is a TS [Top Secret] tape, or higher if necessary. What the estimate at that time, as I remember it, was nationalist 10-25 Soviet missiles, and the Air Force estimate, I believe AFCIN [Air Force Chief of Intelligence] descent was 50 I believe at that time so when you said yours was higher than that, would you remember...?

POWER: Considerably higher, this paper would have it, would be up in the 2-400 at that time--be up in that neighborhood.

ELLSBERG: As to what they had at the moment at the time...

POWER: Yes, but what they had at the time was not nearly as significant as what part of how big the program was. In other words, the thing that interested me was what goal had they set now, and particular strength at any time but a pretty good measure of that goal and the timing involved in it, because the timing is the important thing. As you appreciate, Hitler [Adolf Hitler] made his exact timetable, he spelled it out. As a matter of fact, he made three copies of it some four years before he struck. This is a practical and necessary thing for an aggressor to do, he must spell it out, then all of his actions are geared to that timetable so he was operating on the rule of thumb that I would... 4-6 years.

Now then, if he picked say 4-6 years, then the size and the growth of his missile program would give you some idea of his then timetable, and that was particularly significant, exact number at any particular time was not nearly as significant as how big a program they really intended to become involved in. This is his [Inaudible], to us, outlined the threat that we must meet.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember how you got in? You wrote in and said you wanted to discuss this with the president?

POWER: I just asked for an appointment to see him.

ELLSBERG: Was anyone else present with you when you saw him?

POWER: General Lemnitzer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Taylor, and I believe that General Goodpaster [Andrew J. Goodpaster], who was then the aide to the president, he was in and out. I'm not positive if he was there during the entire meeting.

ELLSBERG: Any White House people, Bundy [McGeorge Bundy]...

POWER: No.

ELLSBERG: Kaysen [Carl Kaysen]?

POWER: No.

ELLSBERG: Was there any controversy after the meeting? I take it that...

POWER: No, it was just that it merely outlined that there was this difference of opinion and that the thing that concerned me was that I knew that I didn't know because there wasn't enough hard intelligence and that I was dealing purely on hypothetical assumptions, or you might say circumstantial evidence, and my plan was to get the hard intelligence so we would be able to make an authoritative assessment.

ELLSBERG: So you wanted him to fly the U-2, essentially?

POWER: This is correct. And one of the other things he asked us to do was submit a plan on how to fly them, and of course one of the questions that he asked was can you guarantee that none of the planes will be shot down, and of course my answer was "no," you can't guarantee that. As a matter fact, I said to get the coverage I think we need we undoubtedly will lose some.

ELLSBERG: Oh, you wanted more than a few flights?

POWER: Oh, I wanted some real coverage.

ELLSBERG: Full coverage?

POWER: Well, real coverage, which involved many flights. I appreciated the political sensitivity of it and the position he was in and he gave me the impression that I appreciated his responsibility, and that's the way the matter ended.

ELLSBERG: What was...?

POWER: The flights, of course, were not made.

ELLSBERG: There was an issue at about that time, then, was there not, an operational flight over a contractor or something of that nature, to having to do with their AICBM [Anti Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile] program, wasn't there?

POWER: Well, there have been numerous programs of special flights but what I was really driving at was to cover the potential area which is clear along the line of the Trans Siberian railroad which was the logical area for them to put missile sites, at least initially, was to get coverage with photography of such a resolution that you could definitely establish the size and scope of their program.

ELLSBERG: It wasn't a question then so much of extending the coverage, but to get better

resolution?

POWER: Better resolution and getting it right now. At that particular time you must appreciate, and I don't remember exactly whether we had just started to get the Keyhole or whether....

ELLSBERG: They were getting it one a month, starting from June only.

POWER: Yes, I believe we were in the very initial stages then and of course in the early days the resolution was not good.

ELLSBERG: What more did you hear? Do you remember how the interview ended? Did he give you any indication of what he might do?

POWER: The interview ended with him instructing General Lemnitzer for the Joint Chiefs of Staff to give them their assessment, and his parting remark was, "I want General Power to submit his own."

ELLSBERG: Yes...

POWER: Now, I never heard anything after that.

ELLSBERG: That's very interesting. To get back a bit, this was your first meeting with him as President?

POWER: Yes.

ELLSBERG: To put this in a frame, do you remember when you next saw him, did you...?

POWER: I believe the next time I saw President Kennedy--I'm not sure on this, we would have to establish when he came out to Vandenberg [Vandenberg Air Force Base] to witness the firing of a missile. Now, it was either then, was the next time, or when he came out to Offutt to be briefed on the SIOP [Single Integrated Operations Plan] and the war plans.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember when that was?

POWER: I'll have to get you that exact date. Col. Arnhym, will you see that Mr. Ellsberg gets that exact date. [December 7, 1962 Kennedy visited Offutt AFB]

ELLSBERG: Going back, speaking now of the war plan, one, apparently, of the early interests of the administration was in the war plans. This is his first contact with this sort of thing and the issue arose of whether we were adequately prepared if need be if the Soviets attacked Europe, etc.

POWER: To launch a first strategic strike to hit the first strike against the homeland. Well this whole thing came about during the election year. The issue of the coordination of our war plans was an old issue, was an old problem, that had remained unsolved for too long a period of time.

Now this does tie in with further conversations with the president, but it might be interesting to jump back a little bit to about January of 1960. I gave a talk at the Economic Club in New York City and, you know, there was a talk and question period. At that time in developing a requirement for an airborne alert or weapon systems that did not depend on warning, mind you at this time we did not have any BMEWS, Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, so all weapons systems were ground base, without warning, were extremely vulnerable to surprise missile attack and that was when I was fighting a battle to get an airborne alert that was not dependent on warning. Well, in establishing the requirement for an airborne alert, I, in this talk, gave a hypothetical situation, hypothetical, and those were the words I used, in which the Soviet Union had 100 missiles that are well aimed and placed on the Desired Ground Zeros and I made the statement that with this 100 delivered missiles that they could virtually wipe out our entire nuclear capability. Now this talk had been cleared by the Defense Department, been cleared by the State Department, had been cleared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, been cleared by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and there were many changes that they made. But when I delivered this talk it was a cleared talk. Now we can go back to the forming of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff. Mr. Gates [Thomas S. Gates, Jr.], who was then Secretary of Defense, when he decided to form it and he called me in, Mr. Gates. He said, "Power, you have cause me more trouble than everything else that has happened to me in Washington with the blank, blank speech you gave in New York."

I merely point this out to bring out the sensitivity of the so-called missile gap and as it applied to our military posture and also as it applied to politics at that time. Now, to get back to the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff and why it was formed. We did not have coordinated war plans. We had a system in being that was ineffective and what it was, basically, was that each Unified Command wrote his own unilateral war plan and the only Specified Command, SAC, wrote his. Now, as you know, the Unified Commands are geographical in nature while SAC is global in nature. When they had each finished their own unilateral war plan they sent them to Washington for coordination and they called a Worldwide Coordinating Conference to coordinate these plans. Now two things happened. One, this was a committee action and like all committees, God Bless Them, they do a lot of good but when there are controversial matters that have to be settled they just don't have the machinery. So we never did settle the basic issue which was one of timing plus to prevent duplication or triplication or gaps in the targeting. But even more serious was the fact that some six months transpired from the time these commanders started their unilateral war plans and when this conference met. Now there is a fact of life about a strategic war plan, it is changed on a daily basis and you can understand this if you get one new piece of Intelligence or one new weapon or a unit changes its location the plan has to be updated. Now you can see that even though they had successfully coordinated these plans, due to the passage of six months, the plan that they had coordinated would have been out of date because as another rule of thumb, these changes occur on a daily basis but they are very small, minor, but you

have so many of them that after about 6 months you have to write a whole new plan. So the system was doomed to failure.

Now the Secretary of Defense had asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to come up with a solution. The Air Force recommended a United States Strategic Command. "Let's put all the nuclear force in one command and we'll automatically have coordination." The Army and Navy said, "No, let's stay with the present system but make it work." Now the Secretary of Defense, Mr. Gates, had a problem. He had a split paper. He had to make the decision. He didn't go along with either one. He formed his own solution. He formed a special staff and he called it the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff. I think he made a very wise decision. He named me the head of it as CINCSAC [Commander-in-Chief Strategic Air Command], and this was natural when you consider that SAC supplies 90 percent of the striking power of the Free World plus we had the Intelligence organization and computers and the know-how to write this type of war plan. He said form a special staff and do two things for me. One, prepare a National Strategic Target list. Place all targets that we would attack in case we got into a nuclear war in an order of priority, give them a hardness number of the pounds per square inch that it would take to destroy them and give them a worth, a point system, so that we can rate them and give them a priority. Then having published the NSTL, write me a SIOP, a Single Integrated Operational Plan, for the destruction of these targets. Now you notice I use the word "Integrated" not "Coordinated." It's all done in Omaha. It's automatically coordinated. He directed that I have a deputy from another service. Vice Admiral Stroh [Robert J. "Red" Stroh] is the present deputy. He said it will be manned by all three services. It will be a joint organization working for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. [_____Illegible_____] plan out on 1 December. It was approved by Mr. Gates and the Secretary and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and by President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. And this world, the Free World, would have a fully coordinated war plan for the conduct of general nuclear war starting early in 1961.

ELLSBERG: That's right, it came out in April of '61 as I remember.

POWER: So now Mr. Kennedy walked into office with a going organization and a going war plan. However, we were in the early stages and all the different objections and the different tasks which he must do in order to control this and necessitated a certain type of knowledge on his part. Now I had a briefing which was given to him by the Joint Chiefs of Staff which I attended in the White House.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember when that was?

POWER: I don't remember that date but you can get it from the JCS. At that time and in a very short capsule form an attempt to give him the guts of this program and the basic issues that he should become acquainted with and naturally, I am sure you understand, a plan of this magnitude is a very complex thing with many shadings and fine decisions that have to be made some place along the line and it does require an understanding by the people who direct it. I made the comment at the time that I thought the president should come out to Omaha to the JSTPS and sit down where we could go over this in more detail and discuss it with him. This he did and again Colonel Arnheim will furnish

you the exact date and he spent the best part of a day there while we briefed him in detail on every part of this plan.

Now I have briefed many people on war plans and there is one thing about a briefer. The audience is generally drawing up a conclusion about the briefer, how glib he is or how smart he is, but also the briefer is drawing up his own conclusions about the audience, particularly, where there's a question period. He gets a feel of whether they understand it, particularly, something complex, and I readily came to the conclusion that he had a very quick mind and that he was following this very, very well and I thought he left there with a very good grasp of the war plan, of our strategy, of the problems the consequences of execution. It is very easy to jump to wrong conclusions when you look at this mass of figures and tonnages, mega-tonnages. You can in one sense, looking at it one way, get the impression that, my goodness, we have got more than enough. Now then you can look at it with another set of eyes and take a little more pessimistic viewpoint of what's going to happen and you can be concerned that you don't have enough. These are natural cycles you go through depending on the hypothetical sets you set up. But I remember one comment appears that in talking about the numbers of missiles we should have. He asked me, "Why do you want that extra 100 missiles." I said, as I recall we were walking out of the underground, I said, "Mr. President," I try to bring out that this is an exact size, "basically because we do not have absolute concrete information on their intentions and we never will have." You can know what your own plans are for the future but you will never know what an aggressor's plans are because he can change them on a daily basis so there is always an element of uncertainty. Now were we playing for the survival of this nation, we have had this overwhelming margin, we have had an overwhelming military superiority, and this is what has solved all equations and all problems. There has just been no question about it and he said to me if you can afford it and everything else being equal, this is the sensible course of action. Well, then the statement he made to me was very significant. "He said you mean these people have been bluffing?" I said, "They have been the most colossal bluffers in the history of the world. They have been operating from weakness and at any time we could have backed them down." They have no choice but to back down. We have had overwhelming missile superiority. But I said, "Mr. President, that it is a challenge--to maintain it."

ELLSBERG: That does bring up, by the way, in effect both you and Kennedy were in the position that you get into in '62 and '63 finally concluding that they didn't have as many missiles as you expected them to have.

POWER: No, I still said, all the way through that we never have had sufficient hard intelligence to make authoritative statements.

ELLSBERG: I see, the statement that you just made that we had superiority which was the line the administration took eventually. You weren't sure of that.

POWER: They are two different things. We're talking about the number that they had but we did not have authoritative information on the size. We knew what we had and it was overwhelming so it was not a question of moving decimal

points, of being a little bit right or a little bit wrong. We had such a margin that all of these questions were removed. Now that was the point that I was making, and I went back to 1956 when we had the trouble in Hungary and what they had then in the way of delivery system, what their capability was to destroy us vis-à-vis our capability to destroy them and it was a ratio, a relative strength that counted. It is not so much your strength or their strength, it is your strength in relation to theirs. Now this was the point that the people often forgot and again it is deterrence rather than fight a war and winning it. People get these things confused.

ELLSBERG: Let me ask you, General Power, and it is somewhat a hard question and it is something that I had discussed at great length with Dave Liebman over the past couple of years when I have run into him. It is related to the issue you have raised here. When it comes to building up our own strength and programs then, in looking at the opposing side's forces, you would want to resolve uncertainties on the side of being conservative. And a conservativeness in that case would mean the most that they would come up with and that would be the prudent, conservative way to do it. On the other hand when one comes in a very short term basis into a crisis, like the Berlin crisis, then it could be argued that it can be dangerous to overestimate the opponent's short term strength in that it can inhibit both the president or allies to this extent that they have these facts about what the opponent has at this moment as opposed to what he might have some years from now. So that one faces in estimating something of a dilemma here?

POWER: Now you understand, it's just like putting different lenses in a camera. If you want to take a long range shot you put one lens in, but I would recommend that you take that lens out if you wanted to get a close-in shot where you have great detail. Now you have to put a different lens in your brain when you're dealing with long range problems. You're making decisions that will not effect anything basically today, that will effect your posture 2 years, 5 years, 10 years from now, that is one set of lenses. Now at any given time if you want to do something today you put another lens in and that is an actual, factual situation. These are the forces you now you have, you bought and paid for them, they're in being, you might as well use them effectively. If you have to make an estimate of what the other man has--now that's what a war plan is. A war plan is a virile, real live thing, it never lasts more than 6 months, it's based on a current situation and it is consistently changing. But people get confused, they try to use the same lens for both...

ELLSBERG: That sounds to me like a very good analogy. Did you have the feeling that Kennedy was perhaps using the wrong lens in the summer and fall of '61 when he was worrying about the Berlin situation. It is possible that he perhaps overestimated the risk that he was running at that time?

POWER: No, I think that he understood the strength, the hand of strength he was operating from very well, and I think this is what enabled him to take the actions he took in Berlin and in Cuba. I think he took them with a feeling of great confidence that he was operating from a platform of strength. That was my--and I was operating from a platform of strength and certainly everything I told him and everybody else told him was along that line.

ELLSBERG: On the issue of--oh, something that particularly concerns you as Commander of SAC, was that among the unified and specified commanders you did have this formal and real peculiar relationship with the president, in effect, both of you were plugged into this very sensitive control right to the SAC forces, in control of them. Were you satisfied with the arrangements that were made for the control at that time?

POWER: Completely satisfied.

ELLSBERG: Did these involve the, oh--during the course of your...

POWER: I was completely satisfied. Shortly after my assuming command of SAC in 1957 I felt that there was need for a tightening up of the procedures along this line and I had meetings with Admiral Radford [Arthur W. Radford], who was then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and with the Secretary of Defense along these lines. They came up with what I thought--President Eisenhower was then the president--an excellent solution to this problem. That solution has been in effect ever since that time and is a completely satisfactory arrangement.

ELLSBERG: I am aware of the sensitivity of this and I can tell you, off the record, I know what the arrangement is, although this is very closely held.

POWER: Now I think the important thing along this line is that the president knows who his commanders are and that he has confidence that (1) they know what they're talking about, and (2) that they understand their position in the chain of command. And this is one thing as the Commander of SAC and the head of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff that I have always guarded with a zealous zeal to make sure that my actions or my image are one of an obedient, disciplined military subordinate. This is a vital element in this mutual confidence chain and I do believe that I did establish that and there isn't anybody in this world can point one place where I have ever violated an order or an instruction, because I felt that this was a vital element--that they have confidence that when they tell you to do something that you will do it. Now this doesn't mean that you don't disagree with them in the formation of policy. Now, while it's being formed you owe it to them, it's your responsibility to give your feelings, but once the decision is made, then yours is only to obey. Did you--to sum up your question, that this mutual confidence was established. This was the feeling I have.

ELLSBERG: We might skip ahead to the time when this became a very important matter, the Cuban missile crisis, that's a year later than what we've been talking about, in October of '62. One aspect of that being, wasn't it, that SAC took over the U-2 surveillance starting on the 15th, no starting, actually, on the 13th--12th or 13th... First flight was on the 14th, SAC flight, so that you had the reconnaissance job and then, of course, the deployment aspect, can you discuss that, that would be quite important?

POWER: Yes, course as a commander I had been concerned about Cuba and of course

all these rumors about the build up, and we were delighted to be given the task of getting photographic evidence, and I knew I had the organization to do it, and we put the wheels into motion immediately and we got the photography, there was no question in my mind that we could do it and establish the evidence. Now then, as you know, SAC was the only command that went into what we call DEF CON II, that means everything is counted down and ready, everybody is at the battle stations, it takes just seconds to throw this whole machine into action. This is a tremendous thing to have looking at you and this is a tremendous increase in your posture, and this is why there is little likelihood of a war ever starting this way because an aggressor who is planning a war would be out of his mind to let one start this way, because, instead of us operating from a day-to-day posture, which is essentially 50 percent of the bombers on the alert and a high percentage of the missiles in a [Inaudible] of tension, the whole command gets generated so you might say almost double your strength. And now an aggressor knows this, so this would be a real stupid thing for him to do if he is planning a surprise attack.

ELLSBERG: I see, yes. When did you exactly go into effect, the DEF CON II?

POWERS: This can be gotten out of the record from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But one of the things I recommended at the time and they complied with, course I gave them my recommendations, was to put the airborne alert up because now with the missiles in Cuba we did not have any warning. We did, we put them up and maintained it for better than a month. We flew over 20 million miles of airborne alert during that period of time without an incident which proved, gave me the satisfaction of proving, the argument that I had offered before for an airborne alert.

ELLSBERG: Did--authorize that code through the JCS?

POWER: Well, I don't know, if just came to me from the JCS. And we deployed the force to civilian fields and outlying fields, B-47's...

ELLSBERG: Whose idea was that?

POWER: Well, it was originally our idea in SAC, and we had the plan always and we had, we had done a certain amount of training with the units so we were able to implement this without any fuss at all. These units had been going to these fields, had been surveying them, so it was as smooth as silk.

ELLSBERG: Any other attitudes on the Cuban crisis? We haven't been really asking, I haven't asked too much of your impression of Kennedy directly. Did you agree pretty much with the approach?

POWER: No, I don't mind stating that my recommendation was to move in militarily and clean them out, clean out those missiles and clean up that situation and let the Cuban people elect their own government. I recommended military intervention.

ELLSBERG: With air or invasion, or both?

POWER: Well, air and followed up so that you had absolutely on-site inspection of what was going on.

ELLSBERG: Was it your impression that as he came down to the gun on, say, Saturday, at the end, that would have been October 27th, the Saturday which is before Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] capitulated, that you were getting very close to doing that essentially?

POWER: We were ready. Now, military, we don't make this type of decision, this is made by our civilian superiors. All the military is prepared to do is carry out any of their orders. Now, we were prepared to carry out any order they might have issued but the responsibility of making the decision is not that of the military it is the responsibility of the President of the United States.

ELLSBERG: Let me take a larger lens now myself and ask, you had been in a position almost unequaled as the one I can think of, having seen three presidents, served under them in the same job, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. Do you have comparisons you could make, taking advantage, hopefully, of the privilege of frankness?

POWER: No, I really think that the office does things to any man, the awesome responsibility of the office. I think they are all big men and...

ELLSBERG: But their style of command, you saw them all as commanders as well as presidents, they did differ in styling, a good deal, did they not?

POWER: Yes, but one must appreciate that at my level the orders come through other agencies and there's so much dilution by the time it gets to me as far as who said what and who was strong for this and that. You see, my orders come through the JCS so I would not have the real feel because he is not really commanding me, in the sense he is commanding me through subordinates. So it would have to be somebody much closer who would get a better feel of a man. I never got any impression that they were small men.

ELLSBERG: In the one theme that characterized Kennedy, this notion of flexibility and control, did you have the feeling that this was overdone, say, in adding options or insisting on alternative options, or that sort of thing?

POWER: Well, I could be cynical or sarcastic...

ELLSBERG: Please be both.

POWER: No, I would say you could be inclined to be that but this is not the case. I think that anything as serious as the survival of your nation naturally you're going to explore every possibility and it is not so much a product of any one particular man but as new people and you must recognize there is a vast array of people around the president as new faces come in and new thoughts and new background, new ideas, and depending on their limited background or extensive background, many ideas are thrown into the hopper. But after 37 years of business, you get the impression that as they stay with it and they learn more about the fundamentals, principles don't change very much. The fundamentals remain basically the same even though we go through new fanfare, of new this and new that, basically the fundamental issues remain the same.

ELLSBERG: Did you have...? Could you say anything about your attitudes of the idea that was introduced at first with so much fanfare, on controlled, so-called, controlled responsibility in terms of avoidance of cities, holding reserves?

POWER: These are--been basically misnomers. We've always had control, always had control.

ELLSBERG: Forgive me, I think it is a bad term and...

POWER: Always had control. We could have withheld any part of the force always. There was a large amount of control inherent at all times. They build up this expression, we had no choice but massive retaliation, this is not necessarily so. But what they lost sight of is the fact that in certain situations you have unlimited time, you can even write a new plan, if you're taking the initiative. That depends on the timing, but under the worst conditions where you have to respond after you have been struck, well then you have less and less control. Well, you even had control then because you could have withheld by force structure, withheld by units, you had that control, you had people who knew what each unit was going to do in the war plan, and you had the capability of issuing the orders to withhold anything. Now we did get more sophistication in the handling of the controls in later SIOPs which is natural as this new organization formed, new techniques, improved techniques were bound to occur but they weren't dramatic and weren't the result of any great guidance, let's put it that way. You see, they went natural evolution more than anything else.

Of course, SIOP-62 was the first of the SIOPs and was sort of a first cut, with the emphasis on getting an integrated plan. It could not be terribly elaborate, so if you see some evolution of it, it was bound to occur in subsequent years.

ELLSBERG: Did you have the feeling that the Kennedy Administration did speed up or encourage or influence the evolution at all or that it went about the way it would have in any case.

POWER: No, I think that as people--now you're talking to a man that has spent a good part of his life in this business and there aren't many people that have done that. There are many neophytes who jump into it, and of course a little

knowledge is dangerous often and of course by dangerous I mean you have found all kinds of flaws and new ways to explore. But let this person wander around in elaborance of strategic war planning and pretty soon you see him flat going back to the same plan. Now the first plan which I feel largely responsible for and having been in this business a long, long time, was an extremely sound plan. Now you have people pick a weakness in it, based on their background, and you can explain this is not really a weakness because they don't understand some of the subtle points of it and they think you're parochial and narrow because you don't understand what they're driving at so you just have to go through this business. Now, I don't say this is 100 percent but on many of the issues now you would find as they get in it, the evolution is right back where you started but basically you haven't changed too much. You've changed it in the semantics, you've changed it in the fosse, but you really haven't changed the basic principles.

ELLSBERG: Well, is there--one way to sharpen this would be to say, there is some difference between Option 1, say now, and Option 5, just to take the extreme.

POWER: Well, there always was in the SIOP. There is an Option 1, where you pre-empt, Option 5 is where you retaliate. The first three options are pre-emptions, the last two are retaliation. But always inherent in everybody's thinking, analyzing the hypothetical course of action of this country, the most likely course of action, 5 would be the most likely option because this is where you retaliate after you have been given a surprise attack. So this option more or less always had priority.

ELLSBERG: But was there an option earlier that had allowed minimizing attacks on cities or withholding large amounts of pre-emptions?

POWER: You have always the pre-emption options. Could or could not. You had what is called Option 1, which is only against their nuclear capability. Option 2, their nuclear plus their other military. Say these are the pre-emption options.

ELLSBERG: What I was saying was my impression that these were brought in under the Kennedy Administration.

POWER: No, these were under SIOP right from the word go.

ELLSBERG: Now to mention one thing that probably isn't going to be shown up in history as written from documents. There was an episode in or around early March or April.

POWER: Let me clear up one point--the first two options you would normally execute them as an option but in the plan we have a provision for Plan One and then that picks up the cities and everything else so you have the choice of either one. And you can withhold by country now, task, there are some 4,000 different variables.

ELLSBERG: I was at SAC talking with Dave Liebman in September, I think it was, when

this new formal guidance came down and there was much excitement about it--how this would be dealt with by SAC and I remember he came to me the next day and said General Power said we can live with this. What I was getting back to was an earlier episode when there was some feeling in the White House I believe it was or OSD [Office of Secretary of Defense], was that we didn't have the very best plan that was possible for true pre-emption at that time.

POWER: I think this is a perfectly natural attitude that everyone should have--that we do not have the best plan that we are constantly improving but what I was talking about when I said people are liable to criticism of the plan.

ELLSBERG: No, I wasn't critical. Were you not given the responsibility for...

POWER: I did mention this before. It was along the line that the basic principles don't change very rapidly. Now many of the frostings on the cake change but the basic principles remain the same. A lot of your techniques in the handling of the plan, the control of it. Obviously you improve that with time in this.

ELLSBERG: Let me go back a moment or two to the Russian plans and posture. You always felt that you weren't always sure of what they had but at the same time you must have concluded over the years that they hadn't developed what you expected in '59 or '60. They hadn't built up to our strength, a fact that we surely expected.

POWER: This depends on who you are talking about. Everybody has to keep book on themselves. Now I don't agree with this statement. This may sound a little boastful but I don't think nobody bats 100 percent. I don't know of anybody looking back and just soul searching like myself who has come as close as history actually proved.

ELLSBERG: I don't know anyone who can say they were right on the mark.

POWER: No, because we still don't know. It is still an estimating process. Now we know that one of the things that has been traditional and that is surprise. Anybody can be surprised having lived through the pre-World War II days as a military man I know how wrong we can be. Now granted, this experience may tend to lean a little bit on the pessimistic side but I say that if you must lean, don't lean on the optimistic side too heavily because this is the way you get into war and what we are trying to do is stay out of one. Now we know that any fool can get into a war--particularly an unprepared fool. It takes a real smart man to stay out of one on his terms, honorable terms and it is not an exact science because you only control one part of it.

ELLSBERG: Kennedy was often criticized for saying at Vienna to Khrushchev--that would have [been] in the end of May '61--we are roughly equal in strength force. What he actually said was for purpose of discussion, let's say that we are

roughly equal. According to the estimate at the time that was true at least in numbers. Do you feel that he lost politically by giving this impression?

POWER: I have no way of knowing. In the great battle of politics and the great battle for men's minds, I understand the facts of life and this is something that goes on and I also understand that your real strength isn't something that is estimated or something that is fickle or something that is changeable but what you have, you have, and we had overwhelming strength.

ELLSBERG: One of the upshots in the change in the estimates in the fall of '61 was Gilpatric's [Roswell L. Gilpatric] speech in Hot Springs in October 1961 where he said that our second strike force was greater than their first strike force. Did you feel that was saying too much at the time? Do you remember that episode at all?

POWER: I basically like to operate from this platform that if you really are strong it doesn't matter what is said about it. As a matter of fact if your strength is known and if you're really interested in deterrence and in preventing a war, the fundamental thing is to be strong and let everybody know about it. If you are sincere and you are trying to prevent a war, those two conditions, you obviously don't worry about somebody finding out about your strength. The only thing you would worry about is somebody finding out a weakness and more particularly about a weakness that somebody said you had but you really didn't have. Now these are the bad things as far as maintaining the peace is concerned and it is often difficult to draw a line between some of these things. Because you must have discussion because that is the way democracy operates. But if you are strong you can stand a lot of this.

ELLSBERG: We have covered quite a bit of this. I appreciate it. Can you think of other episodes that came up during Kennedy's life in office that would be worth saying something about?

POWER: He went out to Vandenberg while we demonstrated the [___Inaudible___] missile so he got knowledgeable on that. In one of the discussions we had with him he was convinced of our strength. He said to me "I don't worry about our strategic strength. I know that they can carry out the mission." Then he said I think it is important that other people in the world know. And he said the people you help bring out there and brief, I think you are doing a great service because they go away from there convinced that we are strong. As a matter of fact I, in turn, said to Mr. McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] that we ought to see that all people in this country go out there. He said Mr. Goulart [Joao Goulart], President of Brazil, is coming in and I think he ought to go out. You better come in and have lunch with him and then we will send him out to SAC. I said I think that's a fine idea. We have had all the top people they send out, the President or Secretary of Defense sends them out. I brief them along the lines that show them our strength. There is no question that we are a powerful nation.

ELLSBERG: Wasn't there some question I read in the paper at the time of Eisenhower's meeting with Khrushchev out here or Malinovsky [Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky] or someone like that...?

POWER: Well, we went over to Russia. When I say we, I mean General Twining [Nathan F. Twining], myself, and several other officers as a guest of the Soviet Union in 1956 and there was always this question whether we shouldn't reciprocate. My position, has always been, I would have no objection to their knowing about our strength and it would be better if the top man knew about it because a subordinate might not tell them the truth. But to sum it up I think there has been a good understanding of the fundamental principals of operating from a platform of strength in the past and my only hope is that we maintain that philosophy.

ELLSBERG: Did you feel in the subsequent years going into '63 and '64 that there was a problem arising that the programs were inadequate, that the Air Force position as a whole was that there should be more missiles [that they] weren't pushing the bomber.

POWER: I think the great problem that is arising is in the question of our goal--a goal is to prevent a nuclear war. There is a problem arising as to how to prevent a nuclear war. You appreciate there are two basic methods. One of them is deterrence through military superiority. This is the path we have been going down to the tune of some \$50 billion a year for some time now. It has been a successful formula and there has not been a general nuclear war. Whether it is the best solution I do not know. I do know it has been a successful one. Now there are other people equally sincere trying to prevent a nuclear war and there is nobody more sincere than I am because I know there will be no winners only losers if we get in one and it is a worthwhile goal to try to prevent it. Other people have a different approach. One for example is disarmament. My only point is you can't go down both roads at the same time. As long as the people in this country want to maintain missile superiority they can have it. But a fundamental principal is that they must want it. If they want disarmament they can have it and this is what they will get. But you cannot arm and disarm at the same time any more than you can get dressed and undressed at the same time. So it is a question of the people knowing which course of action they want to follow in order to maintain the peace. To me this is a very vital concern and one of deep concern.

ELLSBERG: Where did you feel that Kennedy or his administration came down on that?

POWER: I feel that without putting it to Mr. Kennedy or anybody else that there is a growing tendency, a growing tendency to lean toward disarmament. I myself indict disarmament as a major cause of war. I think it's devoid of logic, I think if two countries are sincere that they will not resort to the use of arms and what difference does it make whether they're armed or disarmed. But if one is sincere and the other insincere that is the classical problem, its as old as time. I think there's a tendency to move too fast in this.

ELLSBERG: That brought up the test ban and...

POWER: I think that what we should do is try to see if we can live at home without policemen first. Now if you can live without policemen and obey all the laws and be nice, peaceful people, it would protect you from the gangsters in your own society. When you have arrived at that plateau maybe that is the time to really hope that you can really live in a world without policemen to protect you from international gangsters. But I can't understand why you'd want to just disarm and throw yourself on the good will of the mercy of international gangsters too quickly now because everybody would deny that they have any such intentions. But the trouble is you get going for a goal and you mean well and sometimes you can move too fast before you're adequately protected. Now this is going to be the great challenge: that we do not inadvertently disarm. Or if we are going to change our policy of not maintaining deterrence or military superiority we ought to know that that's our policy. I think there's a great challenge and a great confused area here right now in the whole world and I hope its settled on fundamental basic principles, whether anybody likes them or not is beside the point, fundamental principles.

ELLSBERG: Well, there's a great deal more I could ask you but I know this is a full day for you and really appreciate it.

POWER: Well, I think that gives you a little feel of the general situation. Now, this information of course is extremely sensitive and I don't want this in any way to become public property during my lifetime.

ELLSBERG: Right. So, we can get that right on the tape, in fact, he would like the restriction that this be held during your lifetime.

POWER: During my lifetime.

ELLSBERG: And what restriction actually, this should be shown to no one essentially or...

POWER: To be shown to no one.

ELLSBERG: Fine, that is clear cut. That you'll have...

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