

Bromley Smith Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 7/16/1970
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Bromley Smith (1911-1987) served as the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council between 1961 and 1969. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s handling of international crises, the difficulties of establishing an efficient information system for JFK, and tensions between the White House and the State Department, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

BROMLEY SMITH

July 16, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SMITH: [Interruption] I don't know whether the President called it a group or a task force, but Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and General Maxwell Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] were the moving forces. They sat down to figure out how the Bay of Pigs happened. It became clear that they were going to come up with an idea that had been around Washington for years -- a headquarters for the cold war to coordinate all national security program.s

This word leaked to Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and, through various sources, to the rest of us. Bundy was persuaded that this was not the way either to run the government or to organize it. So there was a pretty sharp confrontation. I think Bobby Kennedy and General Daylor had gone pretty far down the road with the President.

The Cold War headquarters idea dates clear back to the forties. Jim Webb [James E. Webb] had talked about it when he was under secretary of state. Part of it was the old OCB [Operations Coordinating Board] concept.

The Kennedy compromise, which came after a long period of thrashing around, was the counterinsurgency group. He arbitrarily limited the new group to counterinsurgency problems. There were efforts to broaden it out but it ended up that the President himself had to approve any additional responsibilities assigned to the group.

The sequel to this story is that when General Taylor was asked years later to review the work of the counterinsurgency group for President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] he

stated that you can't put counterinsurgency in one box and the rest of government policy in another. He suggested what I think is the best way to organize this type of activity in the government,

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the NSAM [National Security Action Memorandum] 341 system. Bundy at that time had already resigned and there was no replacement as yet. Alexis Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] and Maxwell Taylor and some others put the 341 system through. It's a long story why it didn't work out. George Ball [George W. Ball] didn't know what to do with it. He didn't want to touch it. Nick Katzenbach [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach] didn't understand it and got it all crossed up. This administration [the Nixon administration] didn't even try it.

O'BRIEN: Bundy thought of the Kennedy-Taylor proposal as an encroachment on his staff responsibilities?

SMITH: I wouldn't put it exactly in those terms. He wasn't fighting defensively to hang on to responsibilities being taken away from him. He had an organizational concept. He saw the proposal as either a wheel spinning exercise involving overlapping and duplication or an effort to handle outside existing channel policy recommendations going to the President. I think he was entirely right. Also, he believed that if you're going to organize the government this way, you ought not to do it by indirection or by not appearing to change the responsibilities of the various departments involved. But that's part of a much bigger story.

O'BRIEN: Well, what is this? You're talking here in terms of Bundy's organizational concept. And the national security staff during the Kennedy administration has the reputation of being a flexible operation as compared to the previous administration. What is his organizational concept?

SMITH: I don't believe I could answer that. I think you can, though, if you'll ask the right people the right questions.

O'BRIEN: Well, how does it appear to you?

SMITH: One of the things I think you need to read is the November 1960 memorandum of Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt]. What impact that memorandum had on Mac Bundy and President-elect Kennedy, I do not know. There are people who do know. But I was an outsider.

During the time the new group was deciding to abolish the Operations Coordinating Board I was trying to sell the OCB concept to them. I have to share the blame for their lack of understanding of what the Operations Coordinating Board had been doing. The outsiders saw only the public or unclassified product. They never saw the informal weekly OCB luncheons of the under secretaries of state and treasury, the deputy secretary of defense, and

the head of AID [Agency for International Development] and CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. These officials came together as advisers to the President. They dropped their purely departmental responsibilities, and sat as a group trying to help the President run the government. For

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example, instead of saying “The OCB decided...” the deputy secretary of defense would go back and say to his staff, “I’m unhappy about this action and I’d like a fill-in on why we’re doing this. If we can stop it, why we shouldn’t stop.” That part of the Operations Coordinating Board was never visible.

So the new group came in. Bundy was so busy and active that he really had little time to address himself to organization. In addition he was one of the last ranking officials to be appointed and a lot of people had already started thrashing around before his exact role in the staff had been determined.

The new group came in with the idea that there was too much paperwork. Committees were stupid, they came out with bland answers and never got anything done. Therefore, name individuals and hold them responsible. And that is the way things were going to be done.

After Neudstadt made all his recommendations, and after they were accepted, he took a sabbatical at Oxford or Cambridge. He left broken crockery strewn all over the countryside here. Later he is quoted as saying, “On the basis of what I know now, we aimed at Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] but we hit Kennedy.” What he meant was that the White House process he criticized as being over organized and stylized was a system set up by a military officer who had been elected president. President Kennedy needed to be encouraged to formalize decisions and reduce them to writing. He was a political man not acquainted with the hierarchical system of the military as was Eisenhower.

Their idea was to do away with the whole procedure. Even as intelligent a person as Nitze [Paul H. Nitze], for example, testified in the Jackson [Henry M. Jackson] hearings that there was so much wrong with OCB that it should be abolished. If you discovered you needed it, he added, you could start it up again.

So, from the beginning of the Kennedy administration until the middle of February, I was on the outside looking in. The forces that led the Kennedy group to redo the system in the sense of scrapping existing procedures and relying more on individuals, I do not know. But the view was widely shared.

O’BRIEN: When do you first realize, you and the other people on the national security staff, first realize that Kennedy is going to change it? Does this become apparent in the transition period between....

SMITH: What happened was that when Bundy decided to abolish the OCB, he decided to continue the bureaucratic structure of the NSC [National Security Council] staff but replaced all the people.

He realized that as special assistant to the President he didn't know exactly what his role was to be in the Kennedy staff. He encountered some resistance from Kennedy's Senate staff members. The old staff members quite legitimately felt the newcomers were pushing them around and getting to see the President. There were some real sparks.

O'BRIEN: I'd like to document some of that.

SMITH: The smaller Senate staff had worked for a man who had become president. Then the new boys started coming in. The staff was being formed around the President, no longer around the Senator. Basically, the NSC staff became Mac Bundy's staff. Some of the other members of the White House staff didn't inherit a group that had been working together.

In the letter which Bundy later signed and sent to Senator Jackson he said the President was not going to downgrade the coordination of policy, but was going to do it in a different way. People were going to be given responsibility and they could work out machinery they needed. The transition to the new administration was made very well as far as substance was concerned. However, it didn't get down to the actual functioning of government. Maybe it's impossible to do. The new ins and old outs really didn't work together to give continuity to the running of the United States government. The two groups that worked with the outgoing and incoming presidents to run the government they never really got together.

President Eisenhower told President-elect Kennedy that the first man he should appoint should be his special assistant for national security affairs. Given the political complexities in forming the new cabinet, President Kennedy did not name Bundy until late in the game. He even names Bowles [Chester Bowles] as under secretary of state before he named Rusk [Dean Rusk] as secretary.

During the months from the election to January 20, all we could do was to continue as we had been. We also reviewed all the NSC policies that were outstanding. It was a reasonably clean house that was turned over to the new administration.

O'BRIEN: I think you have a very good critical view as someone who saw the process coming into being. And that's, I think, of great importance.

SMITH: I was not a member of the inner circle. I'm sure that there were many conversations between Bundy and Rostow [Walt W. Rostow] and probably Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] and Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan], all those who were part of the new team.

O'BRIEN: Well, I am very curious about one thing, and I think you may really have some insight into this, and that is the reaction of the State Department to the operation in the Eisenhower

administration, and then also, to the problems that apparently occurred between Bundy and the department and the inability of the department to take the role that the President thought they should take. First of all, let's start in the late Eisenhower administration. Does the State Department fight basically a defensive battle against the influence of particularly Defense Department on the National Security Council and on the OCB?

SMITH: No. The chairman of the OCB was the under secretary of state until State decided it didn't have an under secretary to chair it. State wanted to name the deputy under secretary. This so irritate Cutler [Robert Cutler] and President Eisenhower that they named the special assistant to the president as OCB chairman. In those days Cutler dealt only with National Security Council issues. He didn't do presidential correspondence, for example. He didn't handle intelligence on a daily basis. General Goodpaster [Andrew J. Goodpaster] did much State Department business didn't come through the NSC structure. Furthermore, President Eisenhower delegated a tremendous amount of authority to John Foster Dulles.

It's only since 1961 that the NSC staff became in reality a presidential staff, if you wish, a little State Department. Both Mac Bundy and Rostow felt that the NSC staff was supposed to do certain limited things -- only filling in when the State Department did not play its proposed leadership role. The effort was continually made to hold the State Department or the other departments responsible to force them to coordinate and come forward with policy. Both Mac Bundy and to even a greater extent, Rostow, did not step in and say, "Oh, the State Department can't do it, we'll have to do it," until they really had evidence that that was the situation. The coordination that was done in the White House in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations was primarily that which was not being done by other government agencies or departments.

They used to say that the size of the NSC staff depended on how well the State Department was doing its job. If it did its job properly, it could practically wipe out the NSC staff. But I should add that Bundy and certainly Rostow had basic reservations as to whether State really could do this coordinating job.

O'BRIEN: Well, what is wrong with State in 1960 and '61? Why can't they assume more of a role, even, you know, when Kennedy makes a special effort to give the secretaries more control over the broad area of foreign policy?

SMITH: I don't know. I don't think anyone knows the answer. But part of the answer may be that a new administration always thinks it can bring about greater foreign policy change than it really can. Either it promised to do so, or it honestly believes that it can. But there is continuity in U.S. policy. There are built-in lines, so to speak, that may or may not be apparent. How fast does the new administration discover

that some of the things it thought were just plain stupid can be explained on a logical basis to rational men?

Part of the problem was that a lot of people who'd done a devil of a lot of thinking and had an awful lot of ideas in Cambridge and around suddenly inherited the crap game, so to speak. They wanted faster movement toward testing or trying out or getting the proof of certain things that they had concluded were wise to do on the basis of their analysis of some of the problems. Old line agencies weigh new initiatives in terms of their overall responsibilities, maybe too heavily. When a new administration comes in, it has a somewhat different perspective. It has so much coin to spend. To get a Kennedy round of tariff negotiations may cast the administration school integration legislation -- to use a silly illustration. A President has to make choices. For example, a lot of Kennedy people thought that recognizing Communist China was a great idea but if you did certain costs had to be paid. When they began to think out where they were going to spend their coin, the priority of taking a particular action often changed.

But the fault is really the State Department's. State officials have never understood and they have resented that they're stupid or because they're digging thier heels in. A president always thinks its the latter. He is convinced that although he has his hands on the levers of power he can't get the State Department to do anything or to do it fast enough.

One of the clearest illustrations of this feeling was President Kennedy's reaction to the length of time it took the Department of State to get him a reply to a note from the Soviet Union. State had to coordinate the draft reply with all NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] countries. In addition, nobody in State was monitoring it closely. President Kennedy concluded that the State officials were inefficient and incompetent. To my knowledge, no one explained to him that this note going to the Soviet Union had to be coordinated through the NATO powers and that takes some time. Furthermore, the State Department really wasn't too concerned about sending a prompt reply.

No one in the State Department recognized its responsibility to the president for little things. Very often they would drop something that in their view was unimportant. They did not understand that for a host of things they are presidential staff.

Presidents by nature are suspicious of entrenched bureaucracy. They know that part of their future is tied up with some people they really don't think they control. Also, there's been plenty of evidence of what I call rank insubordination. It's increased over the years.

But in answering the question as to why the State Department didn't perform they way the President wanted it to, there are many points that could

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be made. I've dealt with them very lightly. Secretary Rusk during those early days was feeling that way. HE was a different personality than President Kennedy. In addition, there were some disappointed kingmakers over in the White House that were unhappy that Rusk was secretary of state.

O'BRIEN: From the very beginning?

SMITH: From the very beginning they were pouring poison into the system. The press reaction in those first months of Rusk's tenure was pretty hostile.

O'BRIEN: Who was their secretary of state, if they had a secretary of state to make?

SMITH: I'm not sure they ever agreed on anyone. I think they were more interested in someone who was an expansive person like Bowles, as opposed to, say, Rusk, who in their view was a technician. Bundy was trying to establish a closer relationship between Rusk and Kennedy. He arranged trips in the yacht Sequoia to get the President and Rusk together informally.

O'BRIEN: You mentioned that there's a group of people that sort of focused on a guy like Bowles as secretary of state. You used the term "expansive" liberals. Of course, Bundy, on the other hand is a much more pragmatic kind of guy. Do you see that as basically a division on the National Security staff and among the White House advisers and on down the road of the people around Kennedy? Do you see any sort of camps? You know, excepting the...

SMITH: Yes. Mac Bundy or Walt Rostow were about as different as you can imagine. Rostow either learned an awful lot in the State Department or he visualized his later role in the White House much more precisely than anyone thought he would. But in those very early days of the Kennedy administration everybody had ideas; everybody wanted to do things. Schlesinger had his "opening to the Left" in Italy. The trick was to get the idea related to the wheels of the government, to move something forward. Doing away with the NSC-OCB structure didn't give the President an effective way to discuss new ideas or to pin responsibilities on individuals. Bundy saw this and tried very hard with his new National Security Action Memorandums to nail various things down.

One of the arguments I used with Bundy against abolishing the OCB was that many of its actions were taken primarily to get information out of State and Defense and CIA. Part of the OCB papermill was merely to establish lines so that the White House would know what was going on -- or at least the White House staff if not the President. Bundy very properly replied that he didn't need a piece of machinery to get information for the President.

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I have often said, partially in jest, that if we had had the OCB structure along with the involvement and interest of President Kennedy, we would have licked the organizational problem of Washington. One of the difficulties of the earlier piece of machinery was that it worked fine right up to the president, but it was not plugged in to him. If we had known we were going to have a president who would be involved in many questions and really wanted full information, the structure available could have easily become a beautiful service organization for Kennedy. But we were under the shadow of a piece of machinery that was believed to make the job of being President more difficult.

Bundy made clear that the President of the United States really wanted to know in detail what the national security agencies were doing. The State Department channels were opened up. We used to get a few top secret telegrams a month but soon we were getting scores. An information system was built up for the president which was adequate to his needs. Soon we were getting automatic relays of State cables. We let the NSC staff exploit them and we used them to inform the President. Later we opened up Defense channels for the same purpose. For the first time the White House was on the main line. The previous attitude was to hold down information going to the White House on the grounds that the political types would not know how to handle it. The old line agencies had little confidence in the temporary political structure in the White House.

O'BRIEN: Well, you all became great readers, then, of telegrams as I understand, and the cables that were going out and this became a way of monitoring. Well, as that staff operates towards the end of the Kennedy administration, does the President ever really lose interest in monitoring the monitors, in doing some of the monitoring himself?

SMITH: Well, this reminds me to urge you to interview General Clifton [Chester V. Clifton].

O'BRIEN: He's been interviewed by someone else.

SMITH: I hope on this subject. I don't want to belabor this information system. but I think it's about as important as anything a White House staff does. How do you inform the President? How do you avoid taking too much of his time but take enough so that he understands?

In the first days there were three military attaches: Army, Navy and Air Force. Each was pouring information in from his chief of staff. All these were competing with one another for status and for access to the president. The CIA material was coming in via the old Goodpaster channel but was handled by Clifton. I couldn't understand why President Kennedy put up with it but I was told he loved it.

Clifton was the military officer chosen by Bobby Kennedy to handle intelligence. I'd known him much earlier when he was the informal press leak

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for General Bradley [Omar N. Bradley] and I was the informal press leak for Secretary Acheson [Dean G. Acheson]. Together with Bundy we developed an efficient information system. Intelligence was reported to the president by an intelligence officer. If the president's reaction consists of some command, the command went to the command channel rather than to the intelligence channel.

O'BRIEN: Yeah.

SMITH: Clifton soon was the one officer to see the President daily on all intelligence. As soon as he left the oval office, he'd come downstairs to the west basement to debrief. What we were trying to do was restructure the staff. At the same time we were solving a new problem, namely, how do you inform a president who really wants to know.

President Kennedy's reading speed was incredible. I still don't believe it. But I had to believe it because he would ask questions on the basis of having spent less time on a page than it takes me to read the headline. He did comprehend.

O'BRIEN: He was really on top.

SMITH: Eventually a checklist was developed. Basically, it was a series of headlines. If he indicated he wanted to know more about a subject listed we'd give him a tightly written memorandum, attaching some of the documents. This was an effort to try to meet a new requirement -- the information needs of a president. How much of a president's time can be spent reading? Do you fill him in in depth on all current problems?

Bundy controlled the information system. He had a powerful lever to help him do a better job of being a staff assistant to the President. Later on the charge was made that the information well was being poisoned and only favorable things were reported to the President.

O'BRIEN: That's one point that I'm curious about here. Now, does President Kennedy in his dealings with Bundy and with the funneling of intelligence, both raw and refined, does he make an active effort to get out and around to test it, to get views and get information from other places?

SMITH: He can't avoid it. A senator has just come back from a foreign trip and he reports to the President. He gets mail. He has an interview with a correspondent, and the correspondent says, "You've got one of the stupidest ambassadors I've ever heard of down there. You'd better do something."

O'BRIEN: And he relies on newspapers?

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SMITH: The President just has almost unlimited sources of information. There are cross checks all the time.

O'BRIEN: Well, let's take one specific example that you may have some insight in. You sat in on a lot of the meetings in regard to the coup in Vietnam. There was a whole series of meetings from late August on into the early part of September, which sort of coincides with Lodge [Henry C. Lodge] going out and some of the first contacts that are made with the generals in Vietnam. And Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting] is in those meetings. Nolting is in bad, rather bad straits with the department. How does the

President react to the -- if you recall, how does he react to some of the information that he's getting on Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and....

SMITH: I can give you one illustration. Three people went to Vietnam. One was General Krulak [Victor H. Krulak]. They all returned by plane and went directly to a meeting with the President. Each gave a different picture of what they had seen. They almost had a debate among themselves right there. Afterwards the President, quite appropriately, wondered how in the hell all of them, employees of the same government, had visited the same country.

I'm not criticizing the three witnesses nor am I saying that we should have suppressed their information. But the staff should do an information coordinating job for the president.

O'BRIEN: Well, some of his advisors were telling him a little earlier than that that Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] has to go and encouraging him to pursue a policy which would encourage the Vietnamese military to overthrow the government.

Pardon me, this is about ready to run out. Let me...

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

O'BRIEN: We were talking about Nolting's response in the meetings on Vietnam.

SMITH: Nolting engaged in the debate which took place in the council forum. I thought he behaved in an adult fashion during a discussion which almost made it appear as if he were responsible for what some people thought was a failure of U.S. policy. It was quite clear to him that he was carrying out instructions. He had made an agreement with the head of another state which he thought the United States should uphold. It was more than just his personal relationship with Diem. His coming to the last meeting was almost prevented by certain people over in the State Department. The staff did serve the President correctly in calling state to be sure that Nolting came to this particular session.

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One of the striking vignettes I have of President Kennedy was his reaction to news of the death of Diem. The murder had happened the day before a council meeting. As Kennedy walked in he made some remark about how our policy had ended up in Diem being killed.

O'BRIEN: The President felt a certain amount of responsibility, didn't he?

SMITH: Very definitely. He felt he had been involved in what had turned out to be the murder of a person that was the head of a government, as he was, and of a Catholic, as he was.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get any feeling about -- or whether this caused him to change his mind about some of the people who were arguing the very tough policies

which led to or, at least, contributed to the...

SMITH: I don't know. But I've always had the feeling that because of the way this happened, he may well have had some reservations about what he had been told -- namely, that you can't do anything with Vietnam as long as Diem is the head of the government. I can't help but feel that the President wasn't adequately informed on what we thought was going to happen if Diem was removed. It might have been that he got a truer reading of our limited control of things in Vietnam out of that experience. He was certainly out of sorts with the way this had ended up. I do not think it was because he had concern that he, as president, would be blamed for it. I don't think it was that. I think it dramatized the fact that this was a rough ball game and that our influence had been responsible for Diem's overthrow.

O'BRIEN: Well, on down the road, in the year and a half after the Kennedy administration, during the Johnson administration, can you see any second thoughts on the part of people like Bundy and other White House staff, Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] as well as the secretary of state and secretary of defense about that coup? Do they feel that that is a factor in the deterioration that takes place in Vietnam?

SMITH: I don't know. We lost an awful lot of time in Vietnam. Maybe there was no alternative. I wonder whether some people might not have changed their views with the passage of time. On the other hand, I think many of them are so emotionally committed that they probably haven't changed their views.

O'BRIEN: Let's put it this way. You served in the Eisenhower administration in which the OCB would have been the logical place that a situation like this would have been handled. Is this an illustration which perhaps points up some of the dangers of a loosely structured system as the Bundy operation was and....

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SMITH: I don't want to give the impression that all was orderly in the Eisenhower administration. The Diem question probably would have been decided in John Foster Dulles' office in State. Because under Eisenhower there was a conscious effort made to inform the President of things of this kind, so they were really disavowable.

O'BRIEN: He wanted it that way?

SMITH: He wanted it that way. He delegated the responsibility, and he held people accountable. I remember being appalled during a meeting in which President Kennedy was asking for the views of the various people present about who would be a good minister of agriculture or minister of finance, in the Laos cabinet. Here was

a president and his advisers talking about the best people for cabinet jobs in Laos. There isn't enough time for a president to do this. He can't give enough attention to it. And this was Laos, not even Vietnam.

O'BRIEN: Are you suggesting then, that Kennedy, in this kind of pragmatic hot pursuit of the immediate things, that he sometimes lost perspective of...

SMITH: I'm saying that a staff ought to allot a president's time to be spent on national security problems so that he doesn't get into this kind of situation. Now, the contrary was true in the Cuban Missile Crisis. The NSC staff performed very well by ensuring that the people who were sharing that ghastly experience could debate among themselves as to what actions to take. They'd had a great deal of experience in the general area of government. They knew their roles. They knew that they could ask questions. I came away from that confrontation with the feeling that when the total future of our system was at stake, President Kennedy's staff organization worked very well indeed.

O'BRIEN: Well, that's one of the things you mentioned in one of your earlier letters, I believe, to Robert Kennedy when this whole oral history thing came up. You thought that the Cuban Missile Crisis was one of the things that you could really give some insight into. Would you like to get into that today?

SMITH: Well, I think I've probably bored you long enough.

O'BRIEN: No, you haven't. I have the time if you have the time now.

SMITH: Well, maybe we could do that another time, if you define what you would like to know.

O'BRIEN: Okay.

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SMITH: Because I don't want to be a garrulous old man here. [Laughter]

O'BRIEN: Well, this is fine. This is fine. And some of the things we've gone through today -- I think we've gotten a very good organizational insight into that, the way things happen in the government in terms of policy-making and non-policy-making, I guess, in some ways and that's important.

SMITH: I urge you to do one thing in your oral studies. Weigh very heavily the words of the principals. If they haven't answered all your questions, go back at them. A staff officer's reaction is not enough. What you're after are the accounts of those officers who had the responsibility of advising the President and are conscious of their place in history. The judgment of the institution should be made by people who were part of

it and used it, rather than by someone who writes about it on the basis of secondhand information.

O'BRIEN: Well, in coming back to you on that, did you follow the whole Cuban Missile Crisis through the meetings that took place in the U.N. and some of the talks that were going on between people like Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] and Kuznetsov [V.V. Kuznetsov]? Did you continue on out through November and December on this?

SMITH: Yes, I did, clear through until the end. There's been confusion about the various Cuban crisis meetings. The creation by Bundy of the Executive Committee has been pushing back in time to include the discussions that took place long before it was established. There were two meetings of the National Security Council in which the missile deployments were discussed and briefings given before the Executive Committee was organized.

But ExComm was an extraordinary operation from a professional point of view in that the members were there as advisers to the President not as heads of agencies or cabinet departments.

O'BRIEN: Yes.

SMITH: The team aspect was pretty effective. Members stated their views and made their recommendations with the freedom one doesn't always encounter. You didn't have the feeling that General Taylor was stating the Joint Chiefs of Staff position for the record. Or, McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] would say, "My recommendation is this. But you should know, Mr. President, that the chiefs recommend this." Such exchanges were customary in ExComm.

O'BRIEN: Well, one other thing I was curious about, too, in coming back to you again is you also mentioned issues before the National Security Council that were discussed. I've got a list of the meetings, and

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I don't know whether I've got a list of all of the various things that were discussed. Is there any easy way that we could perhaps get at this?

SMITH: Well, I would think your list probably would bring it all alive again. Under Kennedy, the council was not very active. We were searching, frankly, for other ways to get various points of view before the President in a structured way. In an unstructured situation much greater responsibility falls on the special assistant to the President. He really has to be a neutral martyr. From my point of view, he really should be below grade. The minute his head gets up, he becomes a lightning rod. A lot of people who want to attack the President are going to attack his assistant instead. He becomes

identified as a spokesman for the administration. He becomes vulnerable. His tremendous value to the President in a staff capacity is reduced.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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