

Bromley Smith Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 7/23/1970
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 Cold War crises, the debate on recordkeeping during the Kennedy administration, and the access of information in the White House, among other issues.

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Bromley Smith—JFK #2
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
15	Debate on documenting the historical record of the Kennedy administration
18	Access and leaks of information in the White House
19	Contrasts between Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations
21	Mac Bundy's transforming role during John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s presidency
25	Turkish missile incident
25	Administrative styles of JFK and Lyndon B. Johnson ((LBJ)
27	Cuban Missile Crisis
29	Creation of the Executive Committee (ExComm)

Oral History Interview

with

BROMLEY SMITH

July 23, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SMITH: ...the question of recordkeeping and the historical record. Schlesinger had some ideas about how to do this. Immediately, people reacted to Schlesinger -- not the problem. Some thought he was interested in order to have the records available to use for *his* history.

Schlesinger proposed that a young scholar getting his Ph.D. in history be brought down to work with him on the historical project. This floundered because some people did not want control of their papers to go to Schlesinger.

Realizing that this attitude was part of the problem, I proposed hiring a young fellow but making him promise to write nothing. He would do nothing but pick up papers and put them in file cabinets or safes. He would be working for the President and not for himself or anyone else. This was a service to the President for *his* book.

You can't really put a historian in presidential meetings if he only takes notes. You have too many bodies already. If you have a person taking notes. You have too many bodies already. If you have a person taking notes, it's inhibiting to the participants unless the note taker is a member of the group. But the problem is to grab the papers as they are produced and be sure that they get saved. Whoever does this should be interested in nothing but keeping that record. But this proposal was never tried.

I'm sure that if President Kennedy had lived, he would have written a book. I think it was Mac Bundy who said it would have been a kinder book than any that will be written

because he was not only a great but generous man, very human, very understanding of other people's reactions. The disorder that has occurred in the Kennedy memoir writing was primarily because Kennedy was not there to monitor the exercise -- like President Johnson was able to do.

[-15-]

O'BRIEN: If you don't mind, perhaps we can -- since this will be restricted for a number of years -- talk about the way that records were kept, some of the various....
You were talking about the chaos, a few moments ago, in the files of the White House during the Kennedy administration. When you put the National Security Files together, did you have much from the Eisenhower administration that was left over, or were all these things carted out with the Eisenhower administration when they left?

SMITH: The recordkeeping wasn't worse in the Kennedy administration than in another. But it is always a complicated problem. The White House is a very modest operation when you think of what is going on there. It's increasing all the time.

The Eisenhower administration believed you had to run the government by and large by written instructions. When the new administration came in there was a large library of National Security Council papers -- regional papers, country papers, functional papers, and so forth. The Eisenhower administration had reviewed all of those policy documents and left notes saying this policy was current according to its views or this policy needs reviews.

During the Eisenhower administration, the government ran while he was ill on the basis of agreed NSC policies which were spelled out in detail.

When the new administration came in, holders of these Eisenhower documents were told that they were no longer valid as statements of government policy. In those cases where a department felt a policy needed to be restated, that department was to start a process to replace it.

But the basic national security policy we did not invalidate because I felt that if you knocked it out and you didn't replace it, that would become known to the press. Then the press would say that we didn't have any national strategy. We passed out the word informally that anybody basing a program on an old policy paper had better consider the old paper a pretty weak reed. New policy statements should come along with program recommendations.

Part of the record problem was the shift from a council staff to a presidential staff. In the Eisenhower administration the council staff was quite separate from the White House. The bridge to the White House was the special assistant to the President. But when the special assistant to the President became the head of the President's staff for national security affairs, what was left of the NSC staff became the staff of that special assistant. The council became kind of a discussion forum.

Now action documents -- President Kennedy very often used a Churchill [Winston S. Churchill] form of a minute which he personally would send out.

[-16-]

O'BRIEN: These are the National Security Action Memos?

SMITH: No. They would just be memorandums to the cabinet secretaries or agency heads. We had to set up a system to catch this material on the bounce. We had to establish informal arrangements with the department so that as soon as they got one of these presidential memorandums they would call us and send us a copy. Sometimes that would be our first knowledge of the directive, very often anybody's knowledge, other than the President and Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln]. We would then convert the memorandum into a National Security Action Memorandum.

This was our effort to avoid telling the President he couldn't operate this way. Nor could we ask Mrs. Lincoln to catch these directives.

Mac Bundy would run into some of them while they were still in the White House. The President would say, "Oh, I sent this over to Dean Rusk," or he would say, "I'm thinking about doing this." Mac would grab a copy.

In addition, you cannot expect a President to know who should get a copy of each document. Gradually we built up a relationship whereby he would not -- either he didn't know, or he didn't object to the fact that we would look at his directives before they were out. Sometimes one was misaddressed. Those were the toughest ones to handle. When the wrong action officer was named we'd have to work that out with care. We would sometimes broaden distribution of others. These were baby bureaucratic efforts to try to help a President who was thinking of individuals rather than a team. These were efforts to help him handle a vast bureaucracy. Later we insisted that the State Department create a follow-up procedure. They were the coordinator for responses to presidential directives.

All this was part of the process of shifting a senator with a political background and a small, tight staff to an executive -- a President who was the head of a team yet who wanted to deal with individuals.

There's no school for Presidents. One of the staff responsibilities is to solve the organization problem without changing the working habits of the President, rather than trying to change the President.

O'BRIEN: Mrs. Lincoln wasn't very helpful in this, was she?

SMITH: No. I talked to you before about the static caused and the awkwardness of shifting a personalized senatorial staff into the White House, greatly expanding it, dividing up responsibilities, and then trying to make it work as a team. It's very difficult for someone like Mrs. Lincoln, who had had certain prerogatives and access to suddenly become part of a system in which things had to be done differently in order to make it operate efficiently in the President's own interest. The system

has to be fitted and tailored to each individual president. It has to be developed in ways that he possibly is not aware of, hasn't authorized, and doesn't really quite understand, because it isn't worth his time to explain the details to him.

O'BRIEN: Well, with Bundy and the operation and the amalgamation of the staff -- the national security staff and the special adviser -- does this create any friction with some of the other people from the old senatorial staff? I'm thinking of guys like Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] as appointed secretary, and Sorensen [Theodore E. Sorensen].

SMITH: Yes indeed. Kenny O'Donnell in the beginning did not make the President available for intelligence briefings. If it hadn't been for Clifton, who would go up and sit in Kenny O'Donnell's office for hours in order to get in to see the President for three or five minutes, Kennedy would not have gotten the benefit of these tremendous institutions which collect information for him. It would be interesting to ask Clifton questions of this kind, because we were working very closely with him trying to pull the intelligence and the policy together. If Clifton hadn't worked easily with Mac Bundy and with me, we would have had greater friction.

There is also the access problem. Fewer people in my view should have gotten in to see Kennedy on foreign policy problems. If foreign policy recommendations are coming from Schlesinger, Sorensen, Dungan and Salinger [Pierre E. G. Salinger], I don't think the President is being efficiently served. The job of being President is so damn difficult that every effort ought to be made to help him do it. One of the ways to help him is to have a monitoring and review function for all papers that come to him.

It's quite possible that a powerful staff can get off on its own bent apart from the President. You really need a castrated martyr who visualizes his task as nothing more than helping the President.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Did you have any problem with leaks -- leakage of information -- through, let's say, things that were generated in your area that went into the Lincoln files and were there looked at by other people?

SMITH: I really don't know enough to answer that question. We had newspaper leaks but I'm not sure that they came out of the White House. As a general rule we did not have people fighting policy through the press, which is standard Washington procedure.

O'BRIEN: Well, I was thinking of leaks to other people in the White House who perhaps did not have the interest or the responsibilities in the area of national security.

[-18-]

SMITH: Yes, we had a number of those problems. We also had a problem of who had access to sensitive information. When the information channels are opened to

the White House from the various departments, then the White House has a responsibility to monitor access to that information. I'm not saying the President can't show somebody something. But the White House staff must handle information and intelligence so that it serves the President's purpose.

One of the ways that we tried to deal with this problem was to have staff meetings. Jim Thomson [James C. Thomson] who has written that snide piece, never understood what the point of the staff meeting was. In the early days, when we were trying to put the new system together, the staff meeting was an effective coordinating device. We were mixing NSC staff types with the White House types.

In a reaction to the way Eisenhower had run his office, almost everybody had access to President Kennedy. Staff officers could raise anything they wanted to. I'm not saying that that's a wrong system, but it puts a responsibility on someone to let the national security staff know what is going in to be read by the President. Someone should have enough control so that individual staff members can't call up the secretary of state or secretary of defense or the CIA and issue instructions.

O'BRIEN: This was a real problem, wasn't it, some of the staff people, going right on down in the bureaucracy? Was there anyone that did that more than anyone else?

SMITH: I don't think I know how to answer that. I suppose that when Schlesinger really got going he probably caused the most problems. That is not necessarily to say that his actions were wrong or that he shouldn't have done it. Maybe his interventions -- he'd get all wound up and burst in on the President with some totally unstaffed project - had a plus that offset the rocking around that it caused.

O'BRIEN: Just a couple more things on the papers, and then I'd like to work around to the staff again for a moment, but when Mrs. Lincoln swept the papers up, you know, off the President's desk, did you make concerted efforts to get these papers back into your own files?

SMITH: We made as serious an effort as we could. Sometimes we would stand by to get papers signed or initialed and then hand carry them out. Serious efforts were made to get Mrs. Lincoln to understand that it was safe for the president's papers to be held in safes a floor below his office. Sometimes her inability to locate a paper the President wanted helped us build a system. When she didn't have a paper and she called downstairs to ask if we had it our people dropped everything to get it up to her. This was building the presidential file system which is different from a senator's file system.

[-19-]

O'BRIEN: Since years and years from now the National Security Files will be available, are there any peculiarities in the way that they're organized, or just how did you organize them?

SMITH: Frankly, the files just grew like Topsy. No one visualized how the new staff system was going to work out, let alone Mac Bundy, who was living the operation, and establishing his relations with the President and with the other members of the White House staff. We just built up country files and presidential files. We didn't then have control of intelligence. The idea of the situation room and its acceptance as a funnel for information to the White House was hard going all the way. [Interruption]

It was not possible to have an intelligent system because we didn't have control of the papers which were coming in various ways to the President. In the very beginning we had information up to top secret in one file and information of a special category in another file. Later when the volume of papers increased, the absurdity of this separation required by security rules, became quite clear. It is difficult to have a file on a country in one place and then go and get another highly classified one and put them together. This is a continuing difficulty.

Some few staff members were cleared for access to all information. Some staff members would write a policy recommendation on information that was not complete. The paper would come to Bundy who would change it to take into account the additional information that was available to him but not available to the staff man. Obviously this caused hard feelings because the changes couldn't be fully explained.

O'BRIEN: Now in terms of staff men, we're talking in terms of...

SMITH: NSC staff men.

O'BRIEN: Bundy's personal staff, right.

SMITH: That's right.

O'BRIEN: So they didn't have access to all the information.

SMITH: That is correct, and it caused us a great deal of difficulty. Some State Department messages from the secretary to the President or from an ambassador to the secretary had a very restricted distribution. We could not make some of these messages available to all staff members. For a time they didn't realize this. But when they did we would have awkward confrontations.

But that, to a certain extent, explains what would appear to be confusion in some of the files. There wasn't time to redo them and go back and

[-20-]

make them presidential files. They begin rather thin. The broadening out was part of the growth in the staff as it began to expand its role. Mac Bundy, for example, shifted gradually from being a staff person who does not make recommendations except when asked to become an adviser to the President.

SMITH: Well, there is a role change there, and that's one thing I wanted to get into today. You mentioned in the very beginning that Bundy tried to get the President and Rusk together, and you specifically mentioned on the *Sequoia*, for instance. He's very concerned about this relationship, really, isn't he? My guess is that in the early days he may well have thought that Rusk was a captive of department which simply could not respond at that pace and with the intensity that Kennedy was going to insist on as a president running foreign policy.

I think Bundy's feeling was that the State Department should be given a new chance to prove that it could be the coordinating agency of government. Later, he may well have reached the conclusion that the State Department just wasn't able to do the job of pulling the whole town together. In areas where the department did not exercise its prerogatives or provide leadership, he would step in. There were definite areas like arms control and atomic energy where the coordinating mechanism was provided by Bundy and the White House staff or the NSC staff.

O'BRIEN: Is there any point along the line in which Bundy becomes more of an adviser to the President than a staff man and his role grows? Any particular incident....

SMITH: I think that looking at the papers you would be able to make a better judgment on that than I would.

O'BRIEN: Were you aware of any understanding between Bundy and Rusk on these matters? Did they ever come together and talk about each other's roles?

SMITH: I do not know if this was done.

O'BRIEN: Well, putting it into the realm of -- and realizing that it is secondhand information did you catch any of the fallout of this or have any knowledge or insight into any understanding they might have had? Considering it as secondhand information -- for the record.

SMITH: I don't know that I can point to something that would illustrate this. I would just have to generalize, and I don't think that's particularly valuable. You had pro-Rusk and anti-Rusk people in the White House, and that was reflected in pressures on the President in his relations with Rusk.

This idea of the White House being a monolith, the way the State Department looks at it, is really childish. No one should say, "The White House

[-21-]

wants this." The question is, "The White House -- who?" Now, on certain occasions it is the President, and knowing that is valuable.

But sometimes it may well be Bundy or Rostow talking. It's quite awkward for someone in the White House to call the Defense Department and say, "The President wants you to sink ship nine." They'll go out and sink ship nine. Now, if someone says, "We'd like a staff study on whether it would be a good idea to sink ship nine," then at least those who don't want to sink it have a chance to make an argument.

I don't think it's necessarily a service to the President to just carry out automatically any order that he sends down. What he may well want is an analysis.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get any insight into the President's view of the department and Rusk, over the years, and was there any change?

SMITH: Sometimes a President will reflect his irritation to a newspaperman -- without identifying names. A correspondent who's been around a long time can write a decent piece about how things are. In the early months Rusk's stock reached bottom in the press -- there were all kinds of stories about who was going to replace him.

O'BRIEN: Well, how does the President react to this? Do you get any personal insights into any of his feelings on Rusk?

SMITH: He never expressed any to me, so this is just secondhand information. But almost everybody that's talking to the President has a point of view. If I'd been asked, "How do you think Rusk is doing?" for example, I would have had a point of view. Bundy had one, Bobby Kennedy had one, and Kenny O'Donnell had one. A president is constantly hearing evaluations and judgments. I think, probably, the difference between Kennedy the operator and Rusk the operator was somewhat difficult to bridge.

O'BRIEN: Is there anything to the rumors that were circulating in '63 that Rusk was going to be replaced as secretary of state?

SMITH: I don't have any knowledge that would be an addition to what has already been said.

O'BRIEN: Were there rumors in the White House to that matter?

SMITH: I think there were. There almost always are. The problem is to evaluate them.

O'BRIEN: Well, in terms of the staff -- you were talking about some of the Bundy staff, some of the people who were there -- I know you don't want to get into a comparative thing at all, but you did mention

that Forrestal considered himself Kennedy's man. Does that mean that he was Kennedy's man rather than Bundy's man?

SMITH: I don't think Bundy thought that, but I think maybe Forrestal had a relationship to the President that was different than some of the other staff members.

O'BRIEN: This because of Harriman [W. Averell Harriman], primarily?

SMITH: I can't answer that. Forrestal was the young man and had the Kennedy flair. Bundy and Forrestal established a relationship that was superior. But on occasions, I think, Bundy didn't have full control of all of his staff people. He would very quickly regain control, but I think, on occasion, Forrestal and some other members of the staff -- Walt Rostow in certain areas -- would get material straight to the President.

O'BRIEN: Bundy still, though, liked to keep on top of everything, didn't he?

SMITH: He certainly did. A special assistant for national security affairs can't be terribly useful to the President unless he does. If papers are going to the President about which he is not aware, he then may be caught short in a conversation with the President. He doesn't visualize his role as being the only officer who handles matters with the President on national security, but knows his service to the President is reduced if he is not in control of the paper flow.

O'BRIEN: In terms of personality, a lot of people on the staff, seem to have a real antagonism towards bureaucracy and towards the various organizations they deal with. Why is that? Or is that a fair assumption?

SMITH: I suppose it's a fair assumption. Probably, it's because they have never been a part of a bureaucracy. They're not appreciative of the difficulty acting within a hierarchical system. The hierarchical system has some pluses and some minuses. But when you're on the White House side, the minuses really get dramatized. Someone should do a manual for White House staff officers on role and mission and operating techniques. A lot of problems can be avoided.

O'BRIEN: Yes. May I change this?

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

SMITH: There has not been a real understanding study of the tremendous job that this president or any president has to do, and how he

can staff himself for it. Rarely do you get brilliant people who are able to fit into what is basically a second-rate role as staff officers. The essence of this problem is how to relate men with creative ideas and drive, to the President and then relate them to the bureaucracy. The interfaces highly complex.

O'BRIEN: Yes. You mentioned, too, when we talked a little bit, about opening up the State Department, and then, later, opening up the Defense Department, which means that you can go down and you can get them to respond and you get information out of them. Is there any danger in this in, perhaps, what has happened to the State Department in eroding some of the areas that they've traditionally held?

SMITH: This is a danger. For example, a state officer is given the assignment to write a speech welcoming the king of Morocco. The draft goes to the White House. If there isn't a single word or phrase that he wrote left in the speech as delivered, his involvement in the next speech assignment is going to be different. Why bother if the White House is going to redo everything. You can hit a slippery slope.

O'BRIEN: You mentioned in the last interview, you made reference to the organizational problem in the government, and in terms that you had said in the past to Bundy and to other people that had the President maintained the structure of the NSC and combined that with his interest, that you could have licked the organization problem in the government. We've been talking a lot about the organizational problem, just in kind of summing up, what is it in 1961?

SMITH: I suppose in summing it up it was the view that the President and those around him could produce the changes, which they wanted to produce in policy, without going through all of the travail and the delay and the boredom that comes when you relate the power of the motor to the wheels. Your best answer to that particular question is the comment that President Kennedy made in a TV broadcast, in which almost subjectively, I have always thought -- I've never talked to him about this, so this is my own speculation -- but subjectively, he was revealing to those correspondents the difficulty between taking an action here and having something happen out on the other end. You know the quote I'm referring to.

O'BRIEN: Yes.

SMITH: Now, whether that was written into his script -- you'll know the answer to this -- I don't know. Whether that was instantaneous and came right out, which is what I've always believed, I'd really like to know sometime.

O'BRIEN: Well, I don't. That would be an interesting point, though.

SMITH: In summary, I suppose I would say that the translation of drive, of creative

ideas, into bureaucratic terms with a massive

[-24-]

government is as basic a problem as any president has. I mentioned to you the Turkish missile incident. This was handled in such a way that the White House follow-up system was not operable. I'm not saying the system is foolproof or that the President would have gotten an answer if he had used the system, but I can argue that it might have happened. The odds are that it would have. At least a reporter would have gone back to the President, triggered by the unfinished business file.

The payoff came when President Kennedy understood, for the first time, that an order which he had given -- or thought he had given -- had not been carried out for reasons which were quite valid to George Ball and Paul Nitze, two very intelligent, able, experienced officers. This information got to him at a time when he thought he had U.S. missiles in Turkey only to have them suddenly turn up as a very important bargain counter in the hands of the Russians during a crucial negotiation.

Lower officers will sometimes interpret a president's decision in a way which they think is more intelligent. They rationalize that if he'd known all the facts, he obviously wouldn't have wanted us to push the Turks off the deep end.

The end result was that orders went out to defuse the missiles, which, incidentally, belonged to the Turks at this point. We had the kind of control to do that, fortunately. This particular issue made a lot of difference to the peace of mind of a president under the greatest tension.

O'BRIEN: Well, between '61 and '68 and the time that you leave do you see this organizational problem for a president becoming worse with the growth of government commitments?

SMITH: The power of the president changed after we achieved nuclear weapon capability. I don't believe we have got a hold of the organizational implications of this change. It may well be that a national staff is necessary to run the government out of the White House. I don't think that it should be done that way. It would result in downgrading the departments.

O'BRIEN: When Johnson comes in, is there any major changes in way the staff operates or in the staff that becomes apparent immediately? I know things do change for a bit.

SITH: There were substantial changes, but it's very difficult to generalize. One thing that happened was that we moved from an oral to a written basis of access to Johnson. He is not a Kennedy. Even though he couldn't read nearly as fast as Kennedy, he preferred to get information by reading than in oral exchange. He didn't like the confrontation

with staff members that Kennedy loved.

It's very difficult not to make one method right and one wrong. I always take the President as the given. His ways of getting information, exchanging ideas and making decisions, just happen to be his way. And I always resent the bureaucracy's effort to force him into certain patterns of behavior and to say that Kennedy's way was better than Johnson's way. I just don't think anybody knows enough to know. There isn't the best way.

For example, President Eisenhower absorbed information best from oral briefings. My guess is that this preference grew up during his years in the military which uses briefings extensively. When Kennedy came in, he had not been exposed to briefings. He did not absorb information quickly that way. He could read so much faster than a man could talk that it was boring for him to sit and listen to a guy stumble along at a slow pace. Consequently, there was an abrupt change.

At one point we had a very highly classified military briefing that was always given the president once a year. Hundreds of people had been involved in its preparation. A group of officers began their presentation. President Kennedy started rocking in his chair. I personally was afraid he was going to leave the room. I leaned over to Bundy and said, "Have you got anything that I can give the President to read?" He handed me some document which I took around the table and put down in front of President Kennedy. He began to read. The tension was off. He didn't walk out of the room. That was the last time we scheduled that kind of a briefings. The next year we gave him the briefer's remarks to read in his office and let the briefers make their presentation to the council. When they were finished, the President came in and started asking questions.

O'BRIEN: Just out of curiosity, what was the nature of the briefing?

SMITH: It was a net evaluation of U.S. and Soviet forces in a total nuclear exchange. But just to finish this briefing business...

O'BRIEN: Sure, go ahead, I'm sorry.

SMITH: President Kennedy asked Dean Acheson to do a quiet review of the Berlin problem. Acheson was summarizing his report when Kennedy cut in to ask a question. Acheson answered the question. The second time the President cut in, Acheson said, "Well, I was going to deal with this a little later on, but if you want the answer now, I will give it to you now." The response was so sharp that President Kennedy broke into a laugh and Acheson continued.

Presidents inform themselves in different ways. Here was a former secretary of state, whose briefings was so slow that the President was way ahead of him and was asking questions, which in effect upset this older man who had briefed a lot of people in his time.

O'BRIEN: Well, we've covered a number of things there. I would like to get into the missile crisis for a moment today, if we could, and just ask you a few questions about that. When did you first come into the knowledge that there were missiles in Cuba, medium-range ballistic missiles?

SMITH: The day Bundy told the President. I first knew when Bundy began cutting himself out from a lot of things and redirecting the flow of information. He asked Carl Kaysen to pick up most projects.

O'BRIEN: Or Komer [Robert W. Komer], either one.

SMITH: No, it wasn't Komer. He was never used in this capacity. Kaysen picked up more or less the rest of the world. A code name was given the Cuban information and its distribution was severely restricted.

O'BRIEN: No -- right. Right, there's been quite a bit on this. There are some questions that come up, you know, prior to that, and some of it deals with McCone's [John A. McCone] curiosity and also his feeling that there were missiles in Cuba. Was there any really substantial evidence that you can recall that was present before the actual aerial photography was done?

SMITH: No. I think his famous "honeymoon correspondence" were hunches and intuitions of McCone's that really didn't get into the main stream of intelligence.

O'BRIEN: Well, let me bounce something off you that I'm sure is going to get tied into an explanation of the Cuban Missile Crisis. About two or three months ago there was a news report on ABC [American Broadcasting Company] news -- and I don't have the precise date. But it was a reporter by the name of Gill, Bill Gill [William Gill], who said, in essence, that the intelligence community was shaken because of the assassination of von Spreti [Karl von Spreti], the German ambassador in Guatemala, because he had -- and the report goes on -- he had been in Cuba as the German ambassador and had furnished information to the effect that these missiles were present in Cuba. And he had even made a trip to the United States, by the way of Mexico, to talk to members of the intelligence community. And finding a certain reluctance to believe him, he apparently made some kind of pact with Keating [Kenneth B. Keating]. And then the rest of it...

SMITH: For heaven's sakes, I never....

O'BRIEN: Which makes a nice story. It goes on that he had been assassinated by Castro [Fidel] Castro because -- or at least the order for the assassination had gone out from Castro -- because of this.

SMITH: Well, that's a fascinating account.

[-27-]

O'BRIEN: But that's the first time that you've ever -- is this the first time you ever heard the story here?

SMITH: The first time I've ever heard that, that's the only story I've ever heard that even in rumor stage gave Keating additional information than was available to the community.

O'BRIEN: Well, this was on ABC news on a Friday evening. I talked to ABC about it, and they were very surprised that no one picked it up, and no other newspapers or anyone picked it up.

SMITH: I'm surprised that Keating -- you're going to have to interview Keating on that. [Laughter]

O'BRIEN: Yea, well, he's never disclosed his sources to anyone, but he does claim that they're all inside the government of the United States.

SMITH: This, I suppose, would be considered inside the government of the United States, if it was reported somewhere. But that's the first time I've ever heard that.

O'BRIEN: Well, that's good. I'm glad to document that because I'm sure that that is going to work into the mythology of the missile crisis. Well, what is your first reaction when you hear about the missile problem?

SMITH: Well, I think the immediate reaction was, "Here's the problem. We haven't got time to figure out how we got there, but this is where we are." The immediate concentration was on dealing with the existing situation.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any feeling for Bundy's views on it at that point?

SMITH: There wasn't a great examination of the system or questions as to why we didn't know earlier. Everyone focused on how to solve the problem, not how you were going to explain it to the American people. There was a tremendous overflow of energy to solve this particular problem.

O'BRIEN: Well, is it...

SMITH: You see, they'd gone through the Bay of Pigs. There was a tremendous amount of travail following the Bay of Pigs. And there was then deep

preoccupation with the mental state of various people, including the President. There was a tremendous amount of trauma. This reaction did not occur when they learned the Russians had placed strategic missiles in Cuba.

O'BRIEN: There's another point here, in that regard, and as long as we're going back to the period right after the Bay of Pigs, did you ever

[-28-]

get any insight into Lansdale's [Edward G. Lansdale] project, the special project that the President asked Lansdale to undertake? I don't know how to get at it. Just what does it totally entail?

SMITH: I don't think that even all the documents would give you the answer. It was confused from the very beginning. Lansdale himself reacted to this confusion. He thought he was given one assignment, and he got another one -- or it turned out that it was different. There was a great deal of pushing and pulling on that project. It was not a good example of name a man and then hold him responsible. There was a strong dislike to Lansdale in certain places, and that was not help to him. And I'm not criticizing Lansdale. The bureaucracy probably saw his role differently than the President saw it -- or that he himself saw it or assumed that he saw.

O'BRIEN: Yes. What did the President originally have in mind? Do you have any idea?

SMITH: I honestly don't know. I think that he was persuaded that Lansdale had an expertise here that had been downgraded by certain people.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Well, what was Lansdale proposing to do?

SMITH: Well, that's really a long story. The documents are a better source than recollections of people.

O'BRIEN: Yes, I was looking for, you know, a perimeter.

SMITH: Will Bobby Kennedy's papers be in the library, because that's the place to look for the Lansdale material and the early discussions.

O'BRIEN: You know, I'd just like to get your impressions of what you understood it to be. I know there was a total plan for Cuba.

SMITH: I don't know that I could describe it better than that. Basically it was putting another man in charge of an ongoing operation. That caused a certain amount of his difficulty.

O'BRIEN: Getting back to the missile crisis, did you get any insight into the President's reaction? Were you with the President at any point in the next twenty-four hours?

SMITH: There were two meetings of the National Security Council before the Executive Committee was set up. Part of those meetings was spent bringing the council up to date on what the President already knew; and part was giving various members a chance to summarize discussions that had taken place outside the council. Bundy drafted the NSAM which created the Executive Committee.

[-29-]

Bundy was concerned that the role of the departments be preserved. He was very conscious of the effect on the departments of any document that would appear to transfer all responsibility to the White House.

O'BRIEN: Was it Bundy's idea that ExComm should be formed in the way that it was?

SMITH: I can't say but he was the one who set its form. McCone had some rather strong ideas and so did McNamara. Part of the problem was to avoid getting an organization, which I think McNamara favored, to do all the thinking and then to present a recommended course of action to the President. It was clear that in this situation Kennedy was not prepared to do this. Now, that doesn't mean that the group didn't meet without him, because it did.

O'BRIEN: Well, some of the people who've written about the missile crisis suggest that Bundy changed his mind from the beginning of it to the position that he held just prior to the President's announcement: that he had gone from a position of no action to a position of strong action. Did you get any insight into how he was thinking along these lines?

SMITH: I think the best way is to look at what he wrote. His memos are all in the file. The records of the Executive Committee will be indicative of his view. It's very hard to pin down exactly where a person stands when the situation itself is changing. As people are addressing themselves to how to solve a problem, the problem itself is changing. A man's views will be altered on the basis of additional information which only the next day brings to him. It's not that he gets more information which was available but he didn't know about. The event is developing. You can't explain a man's position unless you know what he knew at the time took it.

Various subcommittees were appointed. I expressed some dismay to Bundy. He left me with the impression that this really wasn't too important. They worked day and night, and they produced a whole lot of papers.

O'BRIEN: Well, just to what degree does the national security staff get involved in the

missile crisis? Now, some people are involved and some aren't, as I understand.

SMITH: Bundy was in at the beginning. I came in later and that was the extent of it. After it was all over, negotiations went on for a period, other staff people were brought in.

O'BRIEN: Well, in those days and in the meetings that you were in, do you have any vivid impressions of the President or anyone else that -- or vignettes -- that stand out? [Interruption] Do you have any vignettes or any personal recollections that stand out, either of the President or....

[-30-]

SMITH: I mentioned the most vivid one, when the President walked out of the meeting when he heard about the Turkish missile situation. His brother also left and they walked together outside the oval office.

The other vignette is merely the reflection of how close to form the President operated during the Cuban crisis. The sharp questions, the intensity, the rapidity of the whole discussion and the movement of it was what one had come to expect. Government generally is much slower paced. But there was no tremendous change during the Cuban discussions because a discussion with Kennedy always was at a fast pace, insofar as the President could control it. Sometimes it slows down mainly because people talk slowly.

O'BRIEN: The strain must have been tremendous on people like Bundy.

SMITH: It was really tremendous.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-31-]