

Oral History Interview

with

CLARK M. CLIFFORD

Assistant to White House Naval Aide, 1945-46;
Special Counsel to the President, 1946-50.

October 4, 1973

by James F. C. Hyde, Jr. and Stephen J. Wayne

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CLIFFORD: My major areas of interest, when I was in the White House in the Truman administration, were in the fields of foreign policy and national security. I came into the White House first in the spring of 1945. I was still in the Navy, and I came into the Naval Aide's office at that time as an assistant to Captain [James K.] Vardaman [Jr.], who was Naval Aide. I served in that capacity from the spring of '45 until the spring of '46, at which time Judge [Samuel] Rosenman, who had been counsel at the White House, left. I then succeeded Judge Rosenman, and became Special Counsel to President Truman in the spring of 1946, and served in that capacity for approximately four years

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I was suggesting to you that the major areas of my interest were serving as liaison between the State Department and the White House and also between what at that time were the War and Navy Departments. You will remember that back in 1945 we had no Defense Department. That was first created in 1947. I'm giving you that bit of background because I'm not sure that I gave too much of my attention to the relationship of the White House and what was then the Budget Bureau.

WAYNE: I knew that you had taken Judge Rosenman's position, and I was under the impression that, for example, papers on major bills and particularly on enrolled bills, flowed through the Special Counsel on their way to the President. So we thought that you might have had some exposure in that connection.

CLIFFORD: Yes, I did.

WAYNE: Yes, and we have been carrying on questions in three areas. One is the development of the President's annual legislative program; the second one is the ongoing clearance of Administration positions on either sending legislation up, or before Congress; and the third is the enrolled

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bill area. Perhaps if one or more of those is not relevant we could just save your time and concentrate on the one where you were involved.

CLIFFORD: Well, let me start talking about my recollection of my activity in those fields. Interrupt me anytime with questions if you will . . .

WAYNE: Thank you.

CLIFFORD: . . . so you can utilize me for the particular purposes that you have in mind. Take one, the President's annual legislative program. As we did it then, that was pretty much the function and the responsibility of the Special Counsel. I would get up a letter in the late summer--that would perhaps be August of each year--and I would get that letter out to the departments of Government, and to the agencies of Government, and perhaps to some other individuals suggesting that they submit to the White House their views toward legislation, with particular reference to legislation that they desired for the coming session of the Congress.

Now, that would go to the State Department, to War and Navy, to all the other departments, Treasury,

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Justice and so forth, and their replies would begin to come in. It also went to the SEC and it went to the Federal Communications Commission, the Power Commission, all of the quasi-judicial agencies of Government. One would go, or a letter would go, to the Council of Economic Advisors for any legislation that they had in mind. We started that first, it seems to me, maybe in 1946. I suppose some kind of similar policy had been followed before.

What we found out, perhaps even that first year, was that there would usually be an individual designated in each department or agency to handle this function. Over the next four years, we developed an exceedingly valuable and effective working machinery, because each one of these men who started doing it in 146 in the various departments and agencies usually continued on. In that way, the White House developed a relationship with a working member of each department. My recollection is that at times, in almost every instance, as we began to work on the State of the Union Message, we would invite the man in from State or Agriculture, whichever one he might be, to talk matters out with him. That gave us a much

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better feel than just receiving some cold, formal documentation from the various departments.

The purpose of getting in this information was to have the background of the needs and opinions of the departments and agencies of Government so that we would be able to extract from that voluminous collection of information a legislative program that President Truman wished to advocate and recommend to the Congress. That also pretty well formed the basis of the body of the President's State of the Union address, which of course the President would always deliver personally. We always felt that the language of the Constitution rather implied that the President of the United States should deliver that message personally to the Congress.

WAYNE: Did the Bureau of the Budget serve in any kind of a staff capacity to you and other members of the White House staff in winnowing, or screening this, or so on?

CLIFFORD: Yes, they did. I have some recollection that what we would do would be to bring over from the Bureau of the Budget--by over I mean across the street, because they were then quartered in the Executive Office Building,

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and maybe they still are, I just do not know--and we would bring over at that stage a man or two. My recollection is that that's perhaps the first time I encountered David Bell, who was a very able fellow. We brought him over, maybe with one or two associates, temporarily to serve in the White House during that period. We had a very small staff in the White House.

I might take a moment to comment on that. As time went on, I served as liaison with State and with the War Department and the Navy Department, and after Defense was created in 1947 I served as the liaison there. That job, at that time, was handled by me and one assistant. George Elsey was my assistant. And then to some extent, as time went on, Charles Murphy used to work with me, and even for me. I remember that when I was getting ready to leave in 1950, I recommended to President Truman that Charlie Murphy succeed me. That was our total staff at that time.

Now, we did not serve in the broad area, for instance, that a Henry Kissinger serves in, but we performed many of the functions that the Kissinger operation performs. That is again, I say, the liaison

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with the State and the Defense Departments. At one time I was told that Mr. Kissinger has as many as 140 people working for him. So I don't know what's happened with that operation. We did, it with two, and then after a while three individuals, and I might say it worked very smoothly. I remember the Secretary of State used to call me when he had something coming up and would tell me ahead of time what it was, and oftentimes I would go in then, when he came over to meet with President Truman. That relationship was very definitely that way when Secretary Forrestal, who was first Secretary of the

Navy, and then was the first Secretary of Defense, would come over to see the President.

WAYNE: Do you deplore the proliferation of White House staff as a general proposition?

CLIFFORD: Oh, I think it's ghastly. I think that whole operation is inimical to the proper operation of our Government. I have a lot of regard for the State Department. I think that the State Department should be handled in such a manner that the men who work there have a sense of the importance and dignity of their operation.

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I think the morale of the State Department has been abysmal these last four years, because I think they've been given almost routine administrative tasks to perform, and all the policy decisions have been made within the White House. I think that's unfortunate.

HYDE: Mr. Clifford, on the same subject, would your comments also hold true on the domestic area, the construction of a fairly large White House which begins with Johnson under Califano and then extends to Nixon and the Domestic Council? Would you feel also that this robs some of the departments and agencies of their policy input and perhaps significance?

CLIFFORD: Generally speaking, I would say yes. But I think it is not nearly so acute or extreme as it is in the foreign policy and national security fields.

WAYNE: You mean extreme in a sense of the way that it was done, or just doing it?

CLIFFORD: In both. Again, let me say that in the foreign policy and national security fields, so much of that whole effort was drawn into the White House. It left

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very little for the rest of the Government to do. I think that the functions of the Government that could have been used, were not used, and I think that we lose something by that. I think that there is a value to keeping the departments and agencies in a status of importance, and I think that that was all changed, or has been changed these past years.

HYDE: You were on the other end of this in a way, were you not, in the Johnson administration? Was it Mr. Rostow that was the Henry Kissinger of that day, when you were Secretary of Defense?

CLIFFORD: Yes, to a certain extent that was so. I'll touch on that in a minute. I was going to give a further answer to the question, and that is that as far as domestic policy is concerned, I would feel the same way. I think it's inadvisable to draw so much power into the White House. I think that saps the strength of the Government. I feel less strongly about it in the domestic field, for two reasons. One, a President perhaps needs

more centralization in domestic policy, because that's one phase of Government that members

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of Congress are so interested in, and there are other people so interested in it. I think, to some extent the President's faced with domestic issues so much and he has to pass that on to people. Also, I feel that way because, for a second reason, the domestic policy operation was not nearly so large in either the Johnson or the Nixon administrations, as was the foreign policy operation within the White House. There were not 140 men handling domestic policy. Califano had a substantially larger staff than existed in President Truman's day, or existed in President Eisenhower's day. I don't have the feeling that there was a very large centralization in the Eisenhower administration, that is, pulling a lot of people in. There was great centralization in putting the military staff concept into the White House, which President Eisenhower did.

Now, getting on to your question, Mr. Hyde, about looking at the White House operation from my standpoint when I was in the Defense Department. Ordinarily speaking, the operation at that time, I felt, did not impinge too seriously on the relationship between the Defense Department and the White House because I had a very

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long personal relationship and friendship with President Johnson that went back 25 years. I can see however, if it had not been for that kind of relationship, it's entirely possible that the Rostow operation would have interfered with and would have impinged upon it. I don't know how big his staff got, maybe it was 30 or 40 or 50, or something of that kind. But I did not have the feeling that it was nearly as encompassing.

For instance, you had Dean Rusk in State, and although he and I differed on some policy questions, I considered him to be a dedicated public servant, an experienced man in his field. And he had quite a lot of influence with President Johnson. So I don't believe that Rostow had too much to do with that relationship. And certainly, he didn't interfere very much with the relationship that I had with President Johnson. After a while, as far as Vietnam was concerned, I knew how Rostow felt and he knew how I felt. We were at directly opposite ends of the pole, and President Johnson had the benefit of hearing both of us. For instance, President Johnson was too experienced to get my views of Vietnam through Mr. Rostow, you see. That would

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have been a curious effort. It would have meant going through a considerable distortion, I assure you. But we both had the opportunity to speak out at the time.

HYDE: On that point, Mr. Clifford, what was it, the Tuesday luncheons, the famous luncheons

where you met with the President, did that sort of equal the way things worked in the Truman day? Is that what your remarks suggest because of your personal relationships?

CLIFFORD: It was similar to a certain extent. The operation in the Truman administration was a very informal one. Mr. Truman didn't have a tendency to institutionalize as some Presidents do. Also, President Truman was a very personal, direct man, and that carried through in his contacts with other people. If he did not have confidence in an individual, if he did not feel comfortable with an individual, he didn't see that person very much, and that person would have considerable trouble getting his views before Mr. Truman. On the other hand, if he was comfortable with a man and worked well with him, and in the past had developed confidence, then he saw that individual and he wanted to continue to see him. That's

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one reason why I think the operation around President Truman was kept within certain bounds. He didn't want to bring a lot of people in; he didn't want to have to expand a whole lot of contacts. That was up to the people on whom he depended. For instance, he expected that we were in contact with a lot of the departments, that that was our job to do, and that we wouldn't bring a lot of extra people in.

Now, the Tuesday luncheon was very valuable. That brought together the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President's advisor on National Security, whether it was Mac Bundy or Walt Rostow. Then sometimes a staff member like Harry McPherson and the President's Press Secretary was there. You could speak with complete freedom. Even Dean Rusk would speak with freedom there. Dean Rusk was very concerned about speaking at larger meetings. I wasn't, because I didn't care whether what I said leaked or not; it was all right with me if it did, because we were engaged in those very important policy considerations. At those Tuesday luncheons, the forthrightness and candor with which the men spoke

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was very valuable. And the President could speak very freely at those luncheons, so I think that that was fine. I'm disturbed at the trend of these last years to draw so much of the Government operation and policymaking into the White House. I think that's inimical to the best interests of our country.

HYDE: Mr. Clifford, I wonder if we could go back. Your comments about President Truman interested me. Was President Truman actively involved in the programming function that you have described? Did you get these proposals and then make decisions on them and then approach him, or was he in on this at various stages in the process?

CLIFFORD: I would say that it started at the staff level; this was our function. We might meet

in August with him, and we might have a general conversation--two, or three, or four of us, in the White House. Then we would draw on the departments and agencies of Government for ideas. They would come on in. Most of them were of no significance at all. Most of them were self-serving efforts on the part of a department to get

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something that they=d wanted for quite a long time, and would be of no interest to the President. Much of the material was of too minor significance. It seemed very important to the department. It did not seem important at the White House level.

WAYNE: What would you do with that stuff?

CLIFFORD: We'd put it in the file, just leave it in the file. The important material that came on through might come down to the point where Interior would have two or three suggestions that we thought had Presidential significance. Agriculture might have one or two; State usually had some more. There was more attention given obviously to Treasury and tax matters, and economic matters. But at least we felt that we had tapped knowledgeable, experienced people in Government, and sometimes in that general request a real pearl would appear that we had not found. It's like a diver searching around, and all of a sudden, my God, there would be a pearl as big as a hen's egg that would come up. In my opinion, that alone would justify this effort of searching the departments and agencies of Government,

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because there you tapped very experienced men; you might not know their names. You never would have heard of them before, and you never would hear of them again.

One interesting illustration of this is that at one time in one of these efforts, an idea came over from the State Department, and it had to do with a plan by which the United States could take a more active part in developing the so-called underdeveloped countries. Well, we weren't ready at that particular stage for that; we had a good deal to go in the State of the Union message. The President at that particular time had a legislative program that was taking shape in his mind, and in the minds of all of us, but when he was elected in 1948, after that unusual campaign and that exceedingly startling, even shocking result, he said, "I want something broad and new and innovative, and challenging for my inaugural address."

We were really combing our noggins for something that would be new and provocative. Searching through material that we had, we came up with this idea, that some fellow in the State Department had offered, whether it was a year before or two years before, I

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can't remember. We came across it, and we called that fellow over. I have no idea what his name was, and he talked to us more about it, and then we talked with him about it, and that became Point IV in President Truman's inaugural address. That whole program became known as the Point IV program, and got a lot of publicity at the time. Unfortunately, it did not ever reach the point of usefulness that it could have, and on that I might comment.

Here came up a bureaucratic struggle that you men might have some interest in. Point IV created an enormous impact throughout the world. Here was President Truman saying that the United States was going to address itself to assisting in the economic improvement of many nations in the world. It could be done cooperatively, it could be done from government to government, but what he hoped most of all was that it could be done by cooperation between government and private business. It was unquestionably the highlight of his inaugural address. Papers all over the world were filled with it. There was a feeling of new hope and resuscitation. You see, this was not too long after the war. The

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Second World War ended in '45 and here this was in January of '49.

WAYNE: I remember it clearly.

CLIFFORD: Right. Then the donnybrook started within the Government as to how this was to be handled. I led a group within the White House who very much wanted to create a separate agency. Call it whatever you will, but it would have been responsible for the implementation of the Point IV concept. The State Department said, "Oh, my, don't do that; this should be done within the State Department." Now, mind you, the State Department had not offered the plan. Therefore, from the standpoint of the State Department, it could not have been very important because they had not thought of it. Well, I knew that. That's the bureaucratic attitude. They didn't want somebody else to take it on and make a lot out of it, because then that would in some way impugn the dignity and the proper province of the State Department. We really had a knock-down drag-out fight. Unfortunately, I lost that fight, and it went into the State Department. They gave it to a fellow

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who was Assistant Secretary who had a lot of other duties. We were going to call in some well-known--nationally and world-wide--business figure, and give him a good, big staff and let him get business interested in it. State had a different notion. Now, some fights we won and some we lost. We lost that one, and it never realized the potential that it should have realized for that reason. That may be a little off the track but it still was interesting in considering the types of bureaucratic struggles that go on.

Just one comment before we leave the foreign police and national security development. I believe in strong Cabinet officers. In the first place, if you bring in top grade men, and, if they have responsibility and authority, they will react well to it, and if you continue to give those men responsibility and authority, you will continue to get good men. To me, one of the basic defects, and I deplore it, in bringing so much power into the White House, is that you cannot get topflight men, I believe, to serve in Cabinet positions. Top-flight men are not going to leave important positions in the country, whether they are in business, whether they are in the academic world, whether they are

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in some other governmental phase of operation. You cannot get top-flight men and have them come in and perform purely ministerial duties as heads of departments. Now, you never would have this monstrosity in the White House today, if you'd had a really strong Secretary of State. The only reason that that existed, it seems to me, is because the President chose to have it that way. I know Bill Rogers, and he's an awfully nice, decent fellow, but this wasn't his field. He had not been in foreign policy before. It just went on, and I think that the department was stripped gradually until it almost became accustomed to it; it became a way of life, you see, over the four years.

WAYNE: Maybe they've solved it now by this two-hatted operation.

CLIFFORD: I'm not sure. I'm concerned about the two-hatted operation. I would much prefer the form that was used before. I would much prefer a good, strong Secretary of State who could bring in top-grade people who would give some feeling of significance to our

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Foreign Service, which I think has had such poor morale lately. I think that there should be a small intelligent working staff to serve as liaison in the White House. But, good Lord, if they're going to keep, I don't know what, 100 people over there, and if Mr. Kissinger is going to, as he said, go to the White House first every day and then go to the State Department, I believe that's not the right way to work. I don't find any difficulty in keeping a separation between the White House and the various departments. I rather like that. I don't want them to get too close. I don't want the White House to siphon off the best people from the various departments. I'd rather take those 140 people out of the White House and put them on over in the State Department. Let them work over there where they ought to work, and let there be a small staff, whether it's five, or ten, or fifteen, whatever it takes. I think that's better government.

WAYNE: Mr. Clifford, I wonder if we could just pause and turn off the tape.

CLIFFORD: By all means.

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