

Oral History Interview
with
ADMIRAL LEWIS L. STRAUSS

Member of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, 1946-50; Special Assistant to the President on atomic energy matters, 1953; and Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, 1953-58.

Washington, D.C.
June 16, 1971

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library.

NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for the Harry S. Truman Library. A draft of this transcript was edited by the interviewee but only minor emendations were made; therefore, the reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word.

RESTRICTIONS

This oral history transcript is provided for the use of the requesting researcher only. It may be read, quoted from, cited, and reproduced for purposes of research. Any copy of it made for research purposes, however, is not to be added to the collection of any other library or archives. It may not be published in full except by permission of the Harry S. Truman Library.

HESS: Admiral, I believe it would be proper at the start of our interview to remind researchers who will use this transcript in years to come that they should be sure to read your excellent book Men and Decisions.* Some of the subjects we might have covered in an interview of this nature have probably been covered quite adequately in your book.

Perhaps a good starting point would be to ask you to recall your earliest recollections of Mr. Truman.

STRAUSS: My earliest recollections of Mr. Truman are not precise as to date. He was a Senator, and a member of one or more committees of the Senate, before which committees I testified in behalf of the Navy Department during the war. My recollection is that he chaired a

*Men and Decisions, by Lewis L. Strauss. Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, 1962.

[2]

committee on the conduct of the war. That was not, I don't believe, its title.

HESS: That was really a title that he tried to keep away from, that was the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the national Defense Program, which came to be known as the Truman Committee.

STRAUSS: Yes, that refreshes my memory on that point.

HESS: Was he present at the times that you testified? Do you recall?

STRAUSS: I feel confident that he was, but I could not—I could not swear that he was. In any event, he struck me in those days as being a very fair and judicial man, and I was not surprised when I learned in the press that he had been nominated to the vice-presidency for Mr. [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's final term--what turned out to be his final term.

Mr. Truman was on good terms with Secretary [James V.] Forrestal, and although I was a line officer in the Navy, I think my age, and the fact that I was a reservist and had had no Annapolis training, led me to be used in a capacity where I was, effectively, an assistant to the Secretary, Special Assistant to the Secretary, rather than having a duty in the bureaus of a more technically naval

[3] aspect. I did report for duty, having been ordered up, in the early months of 1941. I was assigned to duty in the Bureau of Ordnance where, oddly enough, I was made General inspector of Ordnance, and I organized the inspection service for the Bureau. Later I consolidated the inspection services for all of the material bureaus of the Navy.

But towards the end of '41 Forrestal, who then had become Under Secretary and, following Frank Knox's death, succeeded him as Secretary, installed me close to him. We had known each other for many years before that in the banking business as very active competitors of one another. I enjoyed this association with Forrestal, and I am obligated to that association for having really brought me to the President's attention.

HESS: Before we move away from Mr. Forrestal, you may have covered most of what you want to say about him in your book, but just what would be your assessment of Mr. Forrestal's value to the United States, both his public and his private service?

STRAUSS: Well, comparisons are odious, but I think he was probably the most valuable civilian in the military area. It's true that Mr. [Henry L.] Stimson, a man of

[4]

vast experience, was still living, still Secretary of War, but his age and health had reduced him to two or three hours of work in the forenoon. And it was well-known to his friends, and his staff, and those who saw him regularly, that that was all that he was able to accomplish.

Does that answer your question?

HESS: Yes, it does.

One other thing on Mr. Forrestal. I have heard it expressed that in 1949 he may have been on the way out anyway, due to a pro-Arab, pro-oil, anti-Jewish attitude that he may have had.

STRAUSS: I've heard...

HESS: Would you comment on that?

STRAUSS: I have heard that stated. I believe it to be absolutely untrue. I could only say positively that he certainly was not anti-Jewish. Not only did he know what I was a Jew (I started to say a devout Jew, I don't think anyone can claim that for himself), he knew that I was an observant and a believing Jew. Had there been latent anti-Semitism in his attitude, it would have been experienced by me, and I did not experience it.

I never heard anything that would have typed him as

[5]

being pro-Arab. That he was "pro-oil" would mean, I suppose, in the minds of those who coined that expression, that he favored the position of the American oil industry which, to the extent that it had large investments in the Middle East, would be quite natural—but not to the disadvantage of his country or industrialists in other areas.

No, Forrestal was an able, upright man who was on his way out in 1949 because literally he had worked himself to death. That was plain to me and to others who knew him. He was a casualty of the war—clearly so.

HESS: You've indicated in your book that you met with him in March of 1949 and was shocked by his appearance.

STRAUSS: Yes, he was haggard, and this was well before the much reported interview that he had with the President when the President told him, as he should, I think, have told him, that he was no longer up to the demands of the job. It may well be that Forrestal was disturbed to hear it from the mouth of the President, and shocked at the fact that he was to be succeeded by Louis Johnson, a man whom he regarded as a politician primarily, although I could tell you things about Louis Johnson greatly to his credit, and indicative of both

[6]

ability and patriotism.

HESS: Would he deserve better than what many of the historians are giving him?

STRAUSS: Yes. Yes, he was a statesman. We became friends, but our contacts lasted really only for the short period of my service after his appointment. He was appointed in...

HESS: March of '49.

STRAUSS: ...March of '49, and I served until April of '50, so for about a year of his service I saw something of him. As a matter of fact, he had recommended me to the President to be chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission after [David E.] Lilienthal had resigned.

I found among my papers (which I had looked over here this morning in preparation for your visit), that I had gone to see Mr. Johnson, at his request, in January of '50, and he told me that he had made this recommendation to the President, and later told me that Mr. [Clark M.] Clifford, in an interview with the President at Key West, had told Mr. Truman that that would be a political mistake, and that he thought Mr. Lilienthal was responsible for having procured this advice to the President from Mr. Clifford.

[7]

As a matter of fact, it made no difference to me as I had resolved not to remain longer with the Commission. Had the President not accepted my recommendation to go forward with the hydrogen bomb, I would have left from sheer discouragement and the feeling that we had taken a wrong course. And had the President accepted my recommendation, as he did, I'd decided to resign because I did not want my colleagues to operate under the embarrassment of having to go ahead on a project which I had initially recommended and which they had so vigorously opposed.

HESS: Was this the major reason for your resignation?

STRAUSS: It was.

As a matter of fact, I resigned on the day that the President made his decision, which was the 31st of January, 1950, and it's an easy date for me to remember because it was my 54th birthday.

HESS: Did partisan politics often play a role in the policy decisions...

STRAUSS: Of the Commission?

HESS: ...of the Commission.

STRAUSS: I would say not at all.

HESS: This brings to mind the subject of the original composition of the Commission. The Commission members

[8]

were announced at a news conference on October the 28th of 1946, and out of the five, four, including yourself, were Republicans, and one, David Lilienthal, was an Independent.

STRAUSS: Well, Mr. Lilienthal—each man should speak for himself—but Mr. Lilienthal's public life had been entirely under Democratic administrations and appointments.

HESS: Do you think he was a little more Democrat than he was independent?

STRAUSS: I would think so. Now that's just an expression of my belief based on many conversations with him.

Mr. [Sumner T.] Pike was certainly not a practicing Republican.

Dr. [Robert Fox] Bacher was a scientist. He has never joined any Republican group of scientists since 1946, and I don't believe he had before.

Mr. [William Wesley] Waymack was a Republican. He was the editor (had been the editor), of the Des Moines Register. I would characterize him as a liberal Republican.

As to my own politics, when the President asked me to take on the job in July of that year of '46, I

[9]

told him that I was a—I said, "Are you aware, Mr. President, that I am a Republican?" I think I added, "And a black Hoover Republican at that."

And he said, "I don't care what your politics area. I hadn't looked into that aspect of it. I know that you will do your duty without partisanship if you take this job on."

I then said, perhaps foolishly, "Well, how did you happen to select me? How did I happen to come to your attention?"

To which he replied, "I don't mind telling you. I asked a number of people for lists of names and though your name wasn't at the top of any of the lists, you were the common denominator—you were on every list. That's why I asked you."

I recall that I then asked, "Who are the others I am to serve with?" And he named four men. I made a note of them at the time and not one of them was on the Commission as it was finally appointed. Either he had not received their acceptances, or they thought better of it and turned it down, or perhaps he had not yet approached them.

HESS: Do you think that the President set out and made a

[10]

conscious effort to divorce partisan politics from the Atomic Energy Commission?

STRAUSS: I have a real assurance of that in this story which I have not seen printed anywhere. As a matter of fact, he told me this himself, and I think it may well have been at a time when others were present, but I do not recall who they were. He said that when the McMahon Bill was being considered in the Congress, an amendment was discussed to the effect that the President, in appointing the commission, would be charged to see that not more than three of its five members of it should be of his own party, and the other two members of the opposition party. And he had let it be known that if that were done, if that amendment were adopted, he would veto the bill because he said, "That would be an introduction of politics into this whole setup and I believe a President would be affronted by the evidence that the Congress had assumed that he might name all the Commissioners from his own party. "The administration of Atomic Energy is too important and above partisanship," he added.

This made a great impression on me at the time and I'm sorry that I cannot precisely recall either

[11]

the date or the occasion.

HESS: Well, one thing I took from your book. On August the 1st of '46, at the time that he signed the Act, the President's remarks were not released by the White House press office, so they were not in the Public Papers of the President, but I took a quote from your book which is on page 388, and Mr. Truman says:

I consider that this bill is not in the best public interest since it invests the atomic energy program with an aura of uncertainty and of partisan politics.

So even at the time that he was signing it, he was pointing out that there were some things about it that he did not like.

STRAUSS: I was not with him at the moment he signed it, but I read the engrossed bill in the Cabinet Room after he handed it to me that morning. I believe I tell in my book how his invitation had reached me on the Pacific coast and how I had returned without knowing what I was coming back to.

HESS: Thinking it was a practical joke.

STRAUSS: I thought it was a practical joke at the coast but, having talked it over with ex-President Hoover, we

[12]

had both concluded that the President was about to offer me the chairmanship of UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), and I said I didn't want to do it. And Mr. Hoover had said, "Well, you must go. When the President sends for you, you must go whatever the inconvenience. But you do not have to accept an offered appointment if you feel it is unsuitable to you."

So I was surprised when he handed me the engrossed A.E.C. bill. I had never seen an engrossed bill before. I was interested in the appearance of it. Have you ever seen one?

HESS: No, I haven't. I understand they are rather nice looking though.

STRAUSS: Well, it's printed—it's printed, not typed, on larger than legal-size material, which has some substance to it, almost like cardboard.

HESS: is it vellum?

STRAUSS: No, a quite heavy paper. The margins are ruled so that the text is, in effect, framed within double-ruled margins.

The moment I started to read it, I recognized it for what it was. I had testified before the

[13]

Congress on the bill—on its predecessor bill, introduced by—the name escapes me—but a Congressman who later had some trouble which it is just as well not to recall. That draft would have turned the whole enterprise over to the Military Establishment, and I was opposed to that.

And after consulting with some of my friends here in town: Senator [Robert A.] Taft, Arthur Krock and, of course, my wife, and calling Mr. Hoover on the coast, I went back to the President that afternoon and said I would come aboard.

Some amusing things happened in that second conversation. I asked, "Who's to be chairman of this group?" And that must have nettled him.

He replied, "Why, Admiral, I'm going to pick the chairman."

I said, "Mr. President, please don't misunderstand my question. I wasn't attempting to make a suggestion. My reason for asking was because there are some men that I would be able to work with and some that I might not, and if your choice is to rest upon someone of the latter, it would be better that you found it out before you appointed me."

[14]

Then he said, "Well, what kind of a man would you want to see as chairman?"

And I said, "Well, out of the blue, I'll mention a name that you haven't selected, Dr. Karl T. Compton. Compton (he is now deceased), was a dear friend of mine. He was a Nobel laureate and President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The President asked me more about him and I told him all I knew. I don't think this is in the book, is it?

HESS: I believe so. I think so.

STRAUSS: Oh, then I won't repeat it here.

HESS: I think so. One thing I wanted to ask. This may be in the book too, and this has slipped my mind. What sparked your early interest in nuclear research and atomic research?

STRAUSS: I'm sure that's in the book.

HESS: Well, that's a page I missed. You know that I mentioned that I skimmed through the book in the last few days.

STRAUSS: Well, that's—in the first place, as a boy, I had wanted to be a physicist, and was unable to go to college because of the financial situation in my family at the time I finished high school. I was

[15]

particularly interested in radiation. In 1935 and 1937, I lost my mother and my father, respectively, in those years as a result of cancer. Are you sure that's not in the book?

HESS: Yes, it's in the book. Yes.

STRAUSS: Okay. And my endeavor to make a cheap substitute for radium?

HESS: For radium, that was your early interest in it?

STRAUSS: That's right.

HESS: Fine. Before we move on, I would like you to give me a brief capsule characterization of the other four men that served on the first Atomic Energy Commission. Let's start with the Chairman, David Lilienthal.

STRAUSS: Lilienthal was younger than anyone except Bacher, and younger than I by about ten or twelve years. He had come up the hard way. He studied law and had made an early start in the law by running a sort of legislative reference office in Chicago.

His appointment to the Tennessee Valley Authority came in the course of the Roosevelt administration, I don't know what year, and he was one of the three commissioners of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Quite

[16]

early, he had a falling out with the chairman, and this became a cause célèbre. The chairman was a good deal older, and the battle became so violent that life became miserable for the chairman so he resigned, and Lilienthal was appointed in his stead.

He displayed a real talent for organization. And it's my belief, though not my absolute knowledge, that the TVA is still operating on the lines of Lilienthal's initial organization.

He was liberal minded. Some called him a Socialist. He frequently expressed contempt for wealth and for men of wealth. Since he has become wealthy himself, there has been an amusing transition in this thinking, and this has cost him some of his early liberal friends. But his friends, until that occurred, were a very loyal coterie. They assured him that he was going to come to blows with the 'fat cat' who was on his Commission, namely Strauss, and my conservative friends assured me with equal vehemence that I would soon fall out with Lilienthal. I don't think he ever did realize that my beginnings were at least as humble as his, and that I had not had the benefit of an academic background such as

[17]

he had achieved.

The next man I will mention on the Commission was William Wesley Waymack. A delightful character, an Iowan and, as I have stated, a liberal Republican—a man of great good humor and even temper.

I think of anecdotes when I think of him. He presented each of us as members of the Commission a pair of underpants on which had been printed a pattern of red ants. He said, "Now, we're soon going to have ants in our pants and we might as well start out with them." He also presented me during this period with a large jar full of aspirin tablets. He said, "I'm satisfied that this won't be more than a week's supply."

Neither Lilienthal, Waymack or Pike had any background in science. The first scientist on the Commission was Robert Fox Bacher, a professor at the California Institute of Technology, about Lilienthal's age, a man who was interested in science and not at all in politics. And as he was the only scientist on the Commission, we were in a sense dependent upon his opinion on any issue where science was involved. I thought that an unfortunate situation,

[18]

and one of the first things I did when some years later I became Chairman, was to have two scientists on the Commission so we would at least be able (if the question was a close one), to have two views.

Now, Lilienthal, Bacher, Waymack...

HESS: Sumner T. Pike.

STRAUSS: Sumner T. Pike. Mr. Pike was a—I can only describe him as a "character." He had been brought up in New England, in Maine. He used to say with some pride that his ancestors, not more than three generations removed, had been smugglers. And whether it had been true or

not, he had gotten a good deal of mileage out of anecdotes about them. His family had more recently been in the business of canning sardines or some other seafood.

He was a bachelor. He kept a large bookshelf in his office filled with paperbacks. Not having a family, he stayed up until all hours reading paperbacks. And in those days he shocked me—I shouldn't be so amazed now—by the fact that in one of his desk drawers, he kept and frequently consulted a quart of bourbon. I'm satisfied that today I would be a good deal more liberal-minded about that kind of thing,

[19]

but I took this nuclear assignment and the whole business with extreme seriousness, and I didn't think that atomic energy and alcohol were miscible. I will say that I never saw him other than "happy" with it. I mean he never appeared to me to be under the influence during office hours.

Well, that's the first Commission. I saw a number of changes in it. Dr. Bacher was succeeded by Dr. [Henry D.] Smyth, the Princeton professor who had written the Smyth Report.

Mr. Waymack was replaced, I believe, by Gordon Dean. Dean was a political appointment pure and simple. he had been a protégé and a law partner of Senator Brien McMahon. He turned out to be an extremely good man. And my recollection of him, before he died in an airplane accident in about '53 or '54—my recollection of him is highlighted by the fact that when I had concluded that the Commissioners were wrong in urging the president not to authorize us to go ahead with a qualitatively better weapon (after the Russians had developed the capacity to produce a nuclear bomb), Dean had come over to my side, and it was a 2 to 3 vote instead of a 1 to 4 vote. And

[20]

you can't help but like a man who has found your logic convincing, especially in a close situation. I'm talking too much, you go ahead.

HESS: That's quite all right. In the announcement at the news conference on October the 28th, the following phrase was used:

The orderly transfer of functions and properties from the Manhattan District may well extend over a period of months.

Was it a smooth transfer from the Manhattan District to the Atomic Energy Commission?

STRAUSS: October 28, 1946, is that right?

HESS: That's right.

STRAUSS: Yes, it was a smooth transfer, with one minor exception. From the point of view of the transfer of property—and by property I also include uranium and bombs—there were no bombs...

HESS: Were you surprised to learn that?

STRAUSS: Yes, so were all the members of the Commission, and with particular surprise in view of the statement that had been made after the second bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki. The President gave the Japanese to understand that if they did not surrender, there would be more of the same. Now, I have satisfied

[21]

myself in the interval that he had no reason to think otherwise. This was a case of his not being as fully posted as he should have been. The Army had told him all they thought he needed to know.

HESS: Do you think the President thought there were more bombs at this time?

STRAUSS: I can't say, except that he never seemed to me to equivocate, and this would have been an equivocation. he wouldn't have had to say it.

HESS: It was quite some time since the dropping of the bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, why hadn't more bombs been constructed in the interim period—from August of '45 until October of '46?

STRAUSS: My belief is that General [Leslie R.] Groves deals with that question in his book Now It Can Be Told. The people who made the bomb, both the Army and the navy, and the scientists were pretty well convinced that the last war had been fought and won and that there was no more need to spend any money.

HESS: The war to end all wars.

STRAUSS: The war to end all wars. That was also said after World War I, however.

HESS: Probably will be said after World War III too.

[22]

STRAUSS: If two fellows will get together and say it, and since they're the only two that will be left...

HESS: if there is anyone left.

STRAUSS: They'll come out of holes. But I believe General Groves deals with that point. There were parts from which such weapons could be assembled.

HESS: To be assembled, unassembled, but only parts for two. Did you detect any hesitancy on the part of the military (and that would include General Groves), to seeing a civilian commission take over?

STRAUSS: Yes, it was a disinclination to see it happen, but not a disloyal disinclination. There was the feeling that civilians could not be expected to realize the demands of security. And as a matter of fact, as things turned out, there was some basis for that feeling. However, the penetration of security in the atomic enterprise had occurred under the military administration. Los Alamos, which was the great center of secrecy and which was an enterprise entirely controlled by the military, had been penetrated by the Rosenbergs [Julius and Ethel], [Klaus] Fuchs, and a whole congeries of Communist agents, not working as one big enterprise but a series of cells which

[23]

scarcely knew—perhaps did not know—of the existence of one another.

This leads me to say that the only difficulty we had in the turnover was the reluctance on the part of the Manhattan District to turn over all of its files. We got its files piecemeal. And to this day, we do not have them all.

For example, in the hearings having to do with [J. Robert] Oppenheimer's loyalty in 1954, which was seven years after the date we are talking about, General [Kenneth David] Nichols, who was number two in command to General Groves, says in a report that he made at that time, that is to say in 1954, that it was not true as claimed by Oppenheimer's counsel that the Commission had before it in 1947 all the facts about him. There were some papers having to do with him which had been turned over by the Manhattan District to the FBI and which the Commission never saw. This was, I think, ascribable to the military concern that a civilian agency had been named to take over its responsibility.

HESS: Did the lack of all of the files in the early days create any problems during those days?

[24]

STRAUSS: No, they did not. Security was the only area in which they could have created a problem for, in the matter of technology, we had the same people working for the Commission as had worked for the Manhattan District. And in the matter of storage of the weapons, the custodianship of the weapons, the Army continued to hold them. We had—the civilians had—nominal control. That is to say, at each of the depots where these things were stored, there was some civilian representative of the AEC who had the key, although the key was symbolic.

The same condition obtained on aircraft carriers with nuclear weapons on board. There was a civilian on board whose job it was to carry the key as evidence of civil control. As a practical matter, at any time the military had wanted to take it away from him, there was nothing to prevent them doing so. There never was any incident, however. It was a smooth-working arrangement.

HESS: On April the 12th of '45 when President Truman took over on the death of President Roosevelt, as you know he knew little or nothing about the work on atomic energy.

[25]

STRAUSS: I think he went on record as saying he knew nothing about it—in his Memoirs.

HESS: That's right. Should (your personal opinion), should a Vice President, should Mr. Truman have been kept better abreast of what was going on?

STRAUSS: I think it was an incredible thing to have kept him in ignorance of it and, as it happens, the lesson was not learned for yesterday evening I listened to Senator [Hubert H.] Humphrey, a former Vice President, being interviewed on this fantastic document* which the Times has just published. Senator Humphrey stated that "Neither when I was a Senator, nor Vice President, nor a candidate for the Presidency was I ever told of the existence of this document, or of the important papers therein contained."

Here's a man who might have become President at any moment during Lyndon Johnson's administration, and the same damned situation was permitted to exist. I shouldn't be...

HESS: I heard the same show and I recall Vice President Humphrey saying last night, "You'd be surprised how little a Vice President actually knows."

*The Department of Defense "History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy."

[26]

STRAUSS: Yes, but then he also said if I'm not mistaken—and I think this is nearly a direct quote—he said, "The military has a system, a code, an arrangement, whereby information is given on the basis of need-to-know. "Now," he said, "I may not have needed to know about these things as Vice President." Obviously he's wrong. He certainly had a "need to know" because the moment the President dies, in an emergency the Vice President shouldn't have to be required to go through a briefing school. It's a very serious thing.

HESS: As Mr. Truman had to do.

On the subject of Mr. Truman's lack of knowledge, just how long do you think that it took Mr. Truman to gain some knowledge of the significance of atomic energy and an understanding of atomic energy?

STRAUSS: Well, my recollection of his Memoirs is that he got it in two sessions. General Groves gave him one briefing and Secretary Stimson another, and Secretary Stimson didn't know very much. He knew the background of orders having been given and so on, but he understood little about the weapon.

HESS: The actual technology of the bomb.

[27]

STRAUSS: No.

HESS: This is my next question. What is your evaluation of the degree of technical understanding that Mr. Truman attained in such matters?

STRAUSS: Well, I think he attained as much as a man could gather under pressures with which he was contending. He didn't have the mathematics, he didn't have the physics, neither of which had been available to him as a schoolboy. He did not need that detailed knowledge, however. I think it's fair to say that the president of General Motors Corporation today could not assemble a Cadillac from spare parts on the floor. He has people who can do it for him.

Truman had something else going for him, and this would more fittingly come from someone other than myself. He had a capacity for picking men and, having done so, putting his bets on them and supporting them. And this turned out well for the country. Clearly, our position has seriously deteriorated in the international field and in the field of defense since Truman and Eisenhower.

HESS: What brought about that deterioration?

STRAUSS: Well, the Russian ability to catch up with us

[28]

technologically, which was very much underestimated here. Many of our top scientists thought that the Russians would never be able to achieve parity, and others placed their possible achievement of it at various dates in the future, fairly remote. Then when they had caught on ...

HESS: Were you personally surprised when they exploded the bomb, or a device...

STRAUSS: No.

HESS: ...in 1949?

STRAUSS: No.

HESS: You were not?

STRAUSS: In the spring of 1947 on the 11th of April, there was a Commission meeting just after we had been confirmed by the Senate. I said, "It seems to me the first thing we ought to do is to put ourselves in a position to see whether any other nation achieves a nuclear weapon capability. And of course that means Russia, and the way we can do that is by flying scoops in

the radioactive clouds that a test will send up into the stratosphere. If they discover how to make a weapon, they will want to test it before they go into stockpiling it."

[29]

Then someone said, "Well, surely the Army has been doing that right along." I replied that I had taken some steps to inquire and did not believe it was being done. I said we ought to get off our duffs and start a monitoring process at once.

My colleagues assigned the job to me. I had a young assistant who had worked for me in the navy, a man by the name of William Golden. he is now the treasurer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. I had him go to the three Departments to see if either had done it separately on its own initiative. The Department of Defense did not then exist, and the three Services did not always keep each other abreast of what they were doing in intelligence. Golden came back and reported, "No, it isn't being done."

So I went to see Forrestal—it was in the summer or early fall of '47—and told him what had to be done. I remember his comment, "The hell you say. Surely, it's being done."

I said, "No, and the A.E.C. will have to do it if the Armed Services do not. If the A.E.C. has to do it, we'll have to procure planes and pilots, and

[30]

we'll have to go to Congress to get the money. It will be the first time the Congress will know that nothing has been done about such a critical item of intelligence."

So Jim called in Kenneth Royall (he died only the other day). He was Secretary of War and then later Secretary of the Army. Royall brought with him General Eisenhower, recently come home to serve as Chief of Staff. All agreed emphatically that this monitoring must be done, and responsibility was assigned to General [Carl A.] Spaatz. (I fear I'm going into too much detail, but what follows is an interesting anecdote.) And I said, "Well, we can prove to our satisfaction that this system will work because in march we will have our own next test out in the Marshall Islands." The test was called Sandstone. "The Air Force should get ready and detect this test by flying at a distance from it and scooping samples of the radioactive debris in the clouds."

I thought preparations were well under way until the week between Christmas of '47 and New Years when all the Commissioners happened to be out of town

[31]

except myself. My wife had come down from new York and so we stayed in Washington. And Spaatz (I think it was Spaatz)—anyhow, two Air Force generals called on me and said, "Look, we're sorry to tell you but we're not going to be able to make this proof by the time of the Sandstone tests." They explained that they hadn't gotten funds in time and hadn't let the contracts for examining the radioactive material, and so forth and so on."

I asked how much money was involved and they replied, "About a million dollars."

"If you let the contracts today, can you be ready for the March test?" I asked. They said they could. They thought they were safe to say that.

"Then, all right," I said foolishly. "I'll write you a commitment now to guarantee that sum, confident that the Commission will take me off the hook when they come back after new Years, but if not you have no excuse for not going ahead. I'm good for that amount."

HESS: You were going to underwrite this personally.

STRAUSS: I did. Thank heaven, the Commission came back and took me off the hook. And the Air Force was

[32]

ready and did detect that test.

Now I come to an amusing anecdote. I told that story of our long-range detection program in my book. Lilienthal has since published a series of what he calls his Journals and, as he tells it, it's his diary. He says it's completely unedited but in one place he says he attended a social function in New York where he met the "beauteous Madam Nhu", the wife of the former head of State in Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Nhu or some such name. From her pictures, she is a beautiful woman. Lilienthal tells how she raged that we Americans had arranged for her husband to be killed and her brother butchered, and so forth and so on. But their death didn't occur until weeks after the date of the diary entry.

HESS: Pretty tricky writing for a diary.

STRAUSS: Yes, but I am off the track of my anecdote. In this same volume there is the following paragraph on page 406:

"October 8, 1962, New York. A talk today with Jim [James B.] Conant. Had I read Lewis Strauss' book? "No, not yet." "Well," said Conant, "his recollection and mine are quite different. But he claims credit for having suggested that the AEC institute a system of detection of atomic explosions. Actually, that was my proposal made first in a meeting of the General Advisory Committee."

But there is no record at all in the minutes of the AEC of any proposal on this subject by Dr. Conant. The General Advisory Committee, of which Dr. Conant was a member, met with the Commission on three occasions between January 1st when the Commission took office and the date of my proposal. The minutes of the General Advisory Committee on these dates likewise do not record anything on the subject of long-range detection by Dr. Conant.

The only reason for including this anecdote is to show how undependable memories can become, mine likewise I suppose, except that in this case mine is documented.

HESS: By the memos of the period.

STRAUSS: By the memos of the period.

HESS: And that was the way that the explosion within the Soviet Union was detected in 1949, is it not, by tracing a cloud?

STRAUSS: That's right. Rather more than tracing it. Planes flew through the cloud, scooped up particular matter which was examined by a contractor, Tracer lab in Boston. And there were enough radioactive particles to identify the composition of the weapon and almost

[34]

precisely the date when it detonated.

When we took this information to the President, he called in the General Advisory Committee and some of them, of great scientific prestige, succeeded in convincing him that it just couldn't have been a nuclear weapon, that...

HESS: What did they think it was?

STRAUSS: ...that a plant blew up. They reasoned that it had to be an explosion. The Russians were so inept that they were probably building a reactor and it blew up. And the President in his statement a month later in late September, somewhere between the 20th and the end of September, was careful to imply that this had been an atomic explosion, but not necessarily the test of an atomic weapon.

HESS: That's right. It was in September '49 when he said: "We have evidence that within recent weeks an atomic explosion occurred in the USSR."

So this was an equivocation about that word "explosion," because there was some doubt?

STRAUSS: In the minds of several scientists, yes. But I did not doubt it. And now I don't even think it was their first test. It was the first one we caught.

[35]

So in the statements that I've made about it recently, instead of saying we detected the first Russian test, I said, "This was the first test that we detected."

HESS: How closely abreast of Atomic Energy Commission matters did Mr. Truman keep himself?

STRAUSS: Well, the President had to be kept abreast at least to this extent. By law, he had to direct the Commission how much fissionable material to make and how many weapons to make. And in order to do that, we had to see him and tell him what our feasibilities were, and then he would give us his instructions.

He also kept abreast of it in numbers of other detailed ways. For example, the law required that the custody of weapons be lodged in the Commission, and I've explained to you that this was to come extent a fiction. But that didn't satisfy the military who felt, and I could understand them, they had the responsibility of looking after the weapons but not the authority over them. A cardinal doctrine of the military, as you know from your own naval service, is that authority and responsibility have to be commensurate.

So the Defense Department insisted that it had

[36]

to have custody of the weapons, actual legal custody. I urged my friends in the Service not to press for it. I said, "If you carry the issue to the President, I think he'll decide against you," as, in fact, he did.

We had a full-dress meeting in his office attended by Forrestal, the brass, and the Commission. And the President heard the presentation of both sides of the case. My recollection is that he called on each of the Commissioners for a point of view.

That was the first time, I believe, that the President ever decided against Forrestal. Until that meeting, he had never gone to the President with any proposal on which he hadn't won the day. It could have been a turning point in his career. And sometimes I've thought it was.

HESS: Perhaps a turning point in his mental health?

STRAUSS: Well, many more things were operating there, familial matters. I know about them, but I've never written about them or talked about them and I don't want to put them into this record in spite of the fact that this isn't going to become publicly available during the lifetime of anyone mentioned in what I have been dictating—and for ten years thereafter.

[37]

HESS: Fine. And one of the questions of this period in history was whether or not we should share our technical information with our wartime allies, the British. What are your recollections and what were your views—should we have shared more information with the British?

STRAUSS: We had running guerrilla warfare on this in the Commission by reason of the fact that the Act contained a fundamental ambiguity. It charged the Commission with keeping secret as 'restricted data' anything having to do with weapons, but at the same time it charged the Commission to do the maximum to disseminate information about the peaceful uses of atomic energy. This is not a quotation but it's the sense of the Act—I think in Article X—it's been

twenty years since I've looked at it. The military and peaceful data were closely linked and sometimes overlapped.

The British made a deal with us called the Hyde Park Agreement, and there's a strange story about that. It was formalized between Roosevelt and Churchill. It had been signed at Hyde Park, from which it took its name, and it committed us to go pretty far in assisting the British in their atomic enterprise. But, of course, it was before the Atomic Energy Act had come

[38]

into existence and the Congress knew nothing of it when the Act was passed. Certainly, Mr. Truman had never heard of it. There was a good deal of doubt as to whether there had ever been such an agreement because we had no copy of it. Mr. Churchill said he had a contemporary signed copy and exhibited it to friends who visited him at #10 Downing Street. The original counterpart—our copy of the Hyde Park Agreement, wasn't discovered until years later when, during a cleaning of the bookshelves in the Roosevelt mansion at Hyde Park, it was found. Someone had laid it on top of a row of books and it had fallen back behind them.

We had a number of meetings on the subject of Anglo-American cooperation and finally worked out a modus vivendi, which was to give the British the kind of information that they would need for defense (so-called weapons effects), and non-weapons applications. But they had their own scientists here who had worked in our laboratories and who knew nearly everything about it. One of those scientists was a naturalized British subject by the name of Klaus Fuchs. So not only did the British know, but Dr. Fuchs, when he confessed, said he had given everything to the Russians as fast

[39]

as he got it. So the whole question of sharing information with the British turned out to be academic.

HESS: What seemed to be the relationship between the Atomic Energy Commission and the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy in the early years, and did that relationship change? As you know, the two men who headed that during the Truman years was Brien McMahon and then Mr. [Bourke B.] Hickenlooper.

STRAUSS: Couldn't have been better under those two men. McMahon was a Democrat but when I retired in 1950 he appointed me as his consultant. he died in '52. He has been generally forgotten, but not by me. The nation is in his debt.

Hickenlooper had been my friend for years before. He was a Republican. The Commission ran into trouble with the Joint Committee when [Clinton P.] Anderson became chairman. He was extremely partisan, and I was in the wrong party. I got the brickbats and it was a grueling experience for me.

When Eisenhower asked me to take another five years appointment as chairman, I said I couldn't do it—not so much for myself, but I didn't want to jeopardize the work of the Commission.

[40]

HESS: Now this was during the Eisenhower years?

STRAUSS: Yes.

HESS: What was his first name, what was Anderson's first name?

STRAUSS: Clinton.

HESS: Oh, Clinton P. as in...

STRAUSS: He had served as Secretary of Agriculture.

HESS: Up until 1948 when he quit to run for the Senate and then [Charles F.] Brannan took over at that time.

STRAUSS: Well, I've never talked about him, I just don't like to. He's sick now anyhow and in bad shape, and we'll just let history take care of him.

HESS: How would you assess the technical knowledge on the technical points of physics, atomic physics, of Brien McMahon and Mr. Hickenlooper?

STRAUSS: And Anderson. None of them knew anything about it but they were candid about that and they provided themselves with experts. The Joint Committee has an extraordinary record of having had a fine staff of knowledgeable men.

HESS: During the years you served on the committee, did you often meet personally with President Truman?

STRAUSS: I met with him only on maybe six or eight occasions;

[41]

twice when I played poker with him—not on the Sequoia, but with...

HESS: Did you ever go to Key West?

STRAUSS: No. Donald Dawson, and the General—I've forgotten his name.

HESS: Harry Vaughan.

STRAUSS: Harry Vaughan. I'd go over to see Sam Rosenman and take lunch. So one or another would say, "Come on down and play some poker—the President is taking a hand." I saw him at other times having to do with when I was resigning.

There were reports that Lilienthal was under the impression that I was seeing the President frequently with backstairs gossip. This was not the case. I frequently visited the White House to see Rosenman or Admiral Souers.

HESS: Sam Rosenman stayed on as Special Counsel, he had been Roosevelt's Special Counsel, and he stayed on from April the 12th until, I believe, February the 1st of '46, a little less than a year. But he was in the White House almost a year after Mr. Truman took over.

STRAUSS: Well, he used to come to Washington—used to see

[42]

him quite often after that. They had a close relationship.

HESS: That's right, he came down quite often.

Just what is your evaluation of Sam Rosenman, while we hit upon the name?

STRAUSS: Well, I love him. He's a genial, wise, very compassionate guy with a fine sense of humor, great knowledge of the law, and great loyalty to the President. I just couldn't say anything but nice things about him.

HESS: Bow he was the Special Counsel. When he left, Clark Clifford took over, then in 1950 Charles Murphy took over. Did you have occasion to work with, or request the assistance of, Mr. Truman's two Special Counsels, Clark Clifford or Charles Murphy?

STRAUSS: Murphy never. I don't even remember him. Clifford, yes.

Clifford was a naval reserve Lieut. Commander who had come in as an assistant to Jake [James K.] Vardaman. Vardaman had been naval Aide but he was a misfit in the job. Nice guy, with a charming wife—I don't think he had anything that Truman wanted, or needed. I don't know why Truman kept him on, but Clark Clifford became Vardaman's assistant and, being quick, clever and energetic, soon had his job. The President appointed

[43]

Vardaman to the Federal Reserve Board, thus making room for Clifford.

HESS: Do you think Mr. Clifford was behind Mr. Vardaman's exit?

STRAUSS: I have no reason to know, but I always believed it. And that was the beginning of Clark's career, and he's still in full tilt. I mean...

HESS: He has had a meteoric career, has he not?

STRAUSS: Yes, he represented me on one occasion—I've forgotten what the subject was. This was during the time he was out. I needed legal advice for something and I thought enough of Clark's judgment to engage him and pay him a fee.

HESS: Did he win the case?

STRAUSS: It didn't go to court.

HESS: Settled out of court.

STRAUSS: It never even got that far. Ad, as I say, I've forgotten what it was. I've never been litigious, and the number of times when I've been a defendant are very few.

HESS: That's pretty good.

STRAUSS: Pretty good.

HESS: That's pretty good. Now, your views and the story

[44]

about the development of the hydrogen bomb is...

STRAUSS: All in the book.

HESS: ...all in the book, but...

STRAUSS: "Is it not written in the book, the wars of the kinds of Israel" and so forth?

HESS: How about that?

But in Mr. Truman's Memoirs he says what we have more or less covered:

On the AEC, Chairman David Lilienthal, Sumner Pike, and Robert Bacher favored a policy of going slow on the hydrogen bomb. Gordon Dean and Lewis Strauss, however, saw no reason for any delay and wanted to go ahead at once with a test program.

Of course, the program was carried forward, this was done. Did you argue with David Lilienthal, did you bring him over to your way of thinking?

STRAUSS: No. He has said, subsequently, that he had come around to it, but following that statement which he made to me, he made another one saying he was opposed to it. Let me...

HESS: One reason, one more think I want to bring up here. The President appointed a special committee of the National Security Council for this, for the...

STRAUSS: [Louis] Johnson, [Dean G.] Acheson, and Lilienthal.

[45]

HESS: That's right, and on January the 31st of 1950, they went to the White House with their report and, supposedly, it was unanimous that they—wherever I got this, I didn't put a footnote down for my notes.

STRAUSS: Well, you got it from Mr. Truman's...

HESS: His Memoirs probably.

STRAUSS: Memoirs, but Acheson says it was 2 to 1, and Johnson told me it was 2 to 1.

HESS: Oh, well, that's where I took this down from the Memoirs. So, Mr. Truman says it was unanimous, but the other two gentlemen say it was not.

STRAUSS: Johnson definitely says that, and I think Acheson indicates it in his book.

Let me interrupt a minute. I mentioned the wars of the kinds. Since you didn't read this with a reading glass, I'm proud of this little paragraph with which I begin the Appendix, because I have no footnotes in my book.

HESS: While you're looking up your favorite, I'll look up mine and I'll read mine.

STRAUSS: (reading):

The institution of "footnote" and "appendix" is a weariness of the flesh.
There is no way to avoid their use, however, since the full story of

[46]

any event cannot be told in one book or even by one author. The ancient scribes who set down for posterity what we know today in Scriptures as the books of First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings, frequently interrupt their narration with expressions such as, "But is this not all to be found in the Book of the Kings of Israel"—or "the Book of the Kings of Judah"—or "the Book of the Wars of the Lord," etc. These tantalizing references have, alas, long since been lost forever, unless they turn up someday in the caves of the Negev, but at least there is a venerable precedent for the employment of notes such as those with which I now follow.

I don't know but what on another occasion, I will use footnotes. People don't like to turn to the back of the book.

HESS: No, they don't. If it's not at the foot, they don't have it. But one of the things that I enjoyed the most that I read in your book was on...

STRAUSS: On page what?

HESS: It's on page 246, and it is one of the quotations that you give heading the chapter on "Decisions in Security," Proverbs 13:3. "He that guardeth his lips keepeth his life; but for him who openeth wide his lips the end is ruin."

I typed that out on a piece of paper and put that up with scotch tape on the wall of my office. I like that very much.

[47]

STRAUSS: I have fun selecting these quotes, such as "If ye had not plowed with my heifer, he had not found my riddle."* Which was all that Samson could say to the Philistines. They had got next to Delilah and she had spilled the beans for them.

HESS: That's right.

And I have a note here about your very keen interest in atomic research because of the death of your parents. Are there any other peacetime uses of atomic energy that you have watched closely through your career?

STRAUSS: Now that I am able to do what I want in this connection, yes. It's used in medicine, in industry, and in many other areas. Now, for example, to bring it down to the personal element, I fell ill last year and the doctors making the usual tests could find nothing; blood seemed to be all right, and they took biopsies of bone marrow and liver and what not, and then they said, "Let us see whether his spleen is normal."

To do this, you put a man on a table under a Geiger counter, and inject into his bloodstream a radioactive material. When it gets into the spleen,

*Samson to the Philistines, Judges 14:18.

[48]

the nuclear disintegrations can be counted by the Geiger counter. The instrument can actually draw the outline of the spleen. My spleen was found to be much enlarged, and it was taken out. Fortunately for me, the spleen, like an appendix or tonsils, is something that you can manage without, not permanently perhaps, but for a while, maybe a few years.

But that's just one use. if you have a goiter, they can give you radioactive iodine just in a glass of water, and iodine is filtered out of the bloodstream by the thyroid gland. A goiter is a disorder of the thyroid gland. And in a few minutes of having taken your iodine cocktail—if the iodine is radioactive iodine—the goiter can be photographed and you can even take enough of the iodine, over a period of time, to wither the goiter away. It's an absolute cure for that disease—as much of a cure as if you cut into the throat and took it out with a knife—and safer.

But I could go on and tell you the uses, medical and industrial, for atomic energy indefinitely. The thing that we were trying to make back in 1938, radioactive cobalt, to use as a substitute for radium, that's become an article of commerce. There isn't

[49]

a hospital of any size in any town of any size that doesn't have a cobalt source at a cost of a few hundred or a few thousand dollars, doing what many hundreds of thousands of dollars used to be required to do with radium.

HESS: Are there any new ones that have come up, any new uses that have come up in the last year or so?

STRAUSS: Of atomic energy?

HESS: Yes.

STRAUSS: Yes, you can date archeological discoveries, anything, you can date anything in the remote past by means of nuclear energy. You can control a paper-making machine to produce paper of a certain thickness, continuously. The same with sheets of steel in a steel mill—or aluminum plant. We now know that food can be preserved without refrigeration, by radiation. The Food and Drug people haven't gotten around yet to certifying it for human consumption, but it preserves the appearance and flavor of perishable food.

HESS: What is your general appraisal of how the concept of the Atomic Energy Commission has worked out?

STRAUSS: I think excellently. A board or a commission, like all boards, is full of splinters. And I don't think we

[50]

should be concerned as a people by that fact, however uncomfortable it is for the members.

HESS: And perhaps we should discuss briefly the events of 1948. And as you are Republican, who did you think would make the best standard-bearer for the Republican Party in 1948? Do you recall?

STRAUSS: '48. That was the year that [Thomas E.] Dewey ran, wasn't it?

HESS: Would you have liked to have seen Mr. Taft there in 1948?

STRAUSS: Yes. Yes, he would have been my candidate. If Hoover had been younger, he would have been my candidate. Everybody thought Dewey was going to win.

HESS: Did you go to the convention that year?

STRAUSS: No. No. And I was surprised when Dewey subsequently told me that Lilienthal had come up to see him to pledge his allegiance. That seemed to me like an offside play. But most people felt that Dewey would win.

HESS: He was trying to get in with who he thought would be the winner, is that right?

STRAUSS: That's the way some play the game. No, Taft had been my candidate, I had...

[51]

HESS: Did you make any speeches that year, 1948?

STRAUSS: Political speeches? No.

HESS: Did you try to keep away from that?

STRAUSS: Well, I don't know what I would have done had I been asked, except that it would have impaired the non-partisan image of the Commission. And I think I would have had the good sense to decline.

HESS: Many people were surprised when Mr. Truman won the election. Were you surprised?

STRAUSS: Sure, I was surprised. I know that...

HESS: Most people were.

STRAUSS: I know that I've met people subsequently who said, "Oh, I knew it all the time." I didn't know it, and I remember it. I remember—what was it that makes me remember this? Either Sam Rosenman or Truman (and I think it was Sam), said that when they came back—I don't know whether I should put this on the tape.

HESS: Go right ahead, it's going to be closed for a while.

STRAUSS: That when they came back from Independence here and there was a crowd that were admitted on the platform of the Union Station and among them was Stu [Stuart] Symington, and the President made some appropriate remarks on that occasion which weren't complimentary,

[52]

but very funny.

HESS: To Mr. Symington?

STRAUSS: About him, having noticed him in the crowd of cheering supporters.

HESS: After that election, during the rest of the administration, did Mr. Truman ever speak to you in private and relate any stories about the campaign or anything of that nature?

STRAUSS: No. He had one classic story to which I was not the single privileged audience. he liked to show a copy of the Chicago Tribune, or some paper...

HESS: The "Dewey Defeats Truman" issue.

STRAUSS: ...with a headline saying that Dewey has swept the country or something of that order, or was sweeping the country. And I have a feeling that he showed it to me, but it may have been that I've so often seen a photograph of Mr. Truman exhibiting the paper that I think I knew about it from him personally. More probably, I did not.

HESS: One point I want to cover with you that you have recorded in your book on page 331, an interview with Mr. Truman was published one week after he left office. This was on January the 27th of 1953.

[53]

STRAUSS: I recall that interview.

HESS: In which he said:

I am not convinced Russia has the bomb. I am not convinced that Russians have achieved the know-how to put the complicated mechanism together to make an A-bomb work. I am not convinced they have the bomb.

And you stated in your book that most likely Mr. Truman was misquoted. I have interviewed the reporter who wrote that story, and he tells me that he was extremely careful to have Mr. Truman review the article before he wired his story to his office in New York.

STRAUSS: Well, as I told you when we began to talk and reached that point, that Truman received such assurance from the high-level scientific characters who came to see him in September of 1949 to the effect that it couldn't have been a bomb that they made a lasting impression on him.

HESS: But there had been another bomb, or at least another explosion, because on October the 3rd of 1951...

STRAUSS: I was gone.

HESS: Yes. There was an announcement put out by the White House. It was read by Joe Short, it was not read by the President, in which he said—the announcement said,

[54]

"Another atomic bomb has recently been exploded within the Soviet Union," and in that one the word "bomb" was used, not "explosion," not "device," but they said "bomb."

STRAUSS: That's one of the reasons I thought he was misquoted in '53 because he had talked about a bomb in '51.

HESS: Should the atomic bomb have been used against Japan?

STRAUSS: Of course, but not over a city. I was opposed to that and I make it clear in my book that I was opposed to it and why. The Japanese were suing for peace and the bombs, as used, were unnecessary. I had a proposal to avoid that by having one exploded over a wooded area, where there was a grove of very tall trees—cryptomerias—tall for Japan.

HESS: How do you pronounce the name of that forest?

STRAUSS: Nikko, it's more than a forest, it's a religious settlement, a complex of woods and temples. The explosion would have burned them up. They are beautiful, but they have been destroyed by fire a number of times in the past and were replaceable. The site has been occupied for fifteen hundred or two thousand years by these temples. Periodically, lightning has set fire to them, but not the forest. It would have been impressive

[55]

to have used the bomb there. We could have warned all the people to leave. And when they returned and saw that for a mile or more about all these trees had been laid down like the spokes of a wheel from the epicenter of the explosion like a giant windrow, I think this would have been just as convincing and far less dreadful than the destruction of two cities and thousands of non-combatants.

HESS: Had you visited that area before?

STRAUSS: Yes, I had visited in 1946 as a tourist.

HESS: Do you think that the United States, and we as Americans, would be in a stronger moral position in the world had these bombs not been used.

STRAUSS: We would have been in a stronger moral position and we would have been stronger materially because if we hadn't done so, it's rather likely that the Russians wouldn't have gone ahead with the expenditure of making the weapon. It's problematical as to whether that would

have been true, but there's no doubt whatever in my mind that the stigma from which we now suffer, we could have avoided.

There was a compulsion to use the bomb—an obsession of some of the top scientists--and when a

[56]

team of Army officers went out to Los Alamos in the early spring of 1945, they carried with them an array of tentative targets. The committee of scientists with which they met in Los Alamos selected the two that became the victims. This I had not known until Oppenheimer's testimony nine years later. The two that were selected, he said, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were the two that seemed 'bright' to them. It will be generations before we live that down.

HESS: In your opinion, what are Mr. Truman's major accomplishments during this career? What were the major accomplishments?

STRAUSS: The decision to undertake the action in Korea was certainly one.

HESS: Is that not a predecessor of the difficulty we find ourselves in today with the Vietnam war...

STRAUSS: No.

HESS: ...fighting Communism.

STRAUSS: No. Yes, I guess some could say that it was, but tactically it was quite different. That was a war which could be won—not this one.

Another major decision was his determination that no nation should be better armed than the U.S. as was

[57]

exemplified by his decision on the hydrogen bomb issue.

And when did the Berlin wall episode occur, wasn't that during his administration too?

HESS: No, we had the blockade, it was not really the wall, but there was a year when they had the Autobahn blocked and we had to fly in supplies for Berlin, the Berlin blockade. The wall, of course, came during the Kennedy administration.

STRAUSS: As late as that? I didn't recall that.

HESS: In your opinion, what will be Mr. Truman's place in history (if somebody doesn't drop one of these bombs on us), and there is a history?

STRAUSS: Of course, it is too early to answer such a question. If you had asked that question of the average American at the end of Mr. Truman's term, the answer might have been, "Well, he'll rank with Van Buren, Polk and...

HESS: Millard Fillmore.

STRAUSS: "...Millard Fillmore," –but no, I think he'll be very near the top of the list.

He had an instinctive capacity for making right judgments—as, for example, what he did in the matter of the custody of nuclear weapons. The public never knew

[58]

about a number of these right decisions, often taken against odds, but they will enhance his stature when history comes to be written.

I think he was a singularly instinctive judge of what was right. I commented a few minutes ago on his good appointments; he also made some poor ones. But when he had to decide about courses of action which hasn't anything to do with whether you appoint "Smith" or "Jones" to be an ambassador or judge, then I think his guardian angel was consistently on the job. Furthermore, he was a man who wasn't ashamed to ask for Divine guidance, to pray.

HESS: Do you have anything else to add on Mr. Truman, the Truman administration, your service on the Atomic Energy Commission?

STRAUSS: Well, I tried to cover that in Men and Decisions. He wrote me a letter when I left of which I am very proud. It was not a stereotype letter. He said that the defense of the country had been materially improved by my service or something to that effect. I felt that it was a real reward.

HESS: Well, thank you very much, Admiral.

STRAUSS: Thank you, Mr. Hess.

Oral History Interview
with
Admiral Lewis L. Strauss

[59]

Index

Acheson, Dean, 44, 45
Anderson, Clinton P., 39, 40
Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), 32-33, 37, 39, 44, 49-50
 Strauss, Admiral Lewis, discusses, 6-15
Atomic weapons, 35-36

Bacher, Robert Fox, 15, 17, 18, 19, 44
Berlin airlift, 57
Berlin wall, 57
Brannan, Charles F., 40

Chicago Tribune, 52
Churchill, Winston, 37
Clifford, Clark M., 6, 42, 43
Compton, Dr. Karl T., 14
Conant, James B., 32-33

Dean, Gordon, 19-20, 44
Des Moines Register, 8
Dewey, Thomas E., 50, 52

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 27, 30, 39-40

Federal Bureau of Investigation, 23
Fillmore, Millard, 57
Forrestal, James V., 2, 3, 29, 30, 36
 a discussion of, 4-5
Fuchs, Klaus, 22, 38
Fox, Dr. Robert, 8

General Advisory Committee, 32, 33, 34
General inspector of Ordnance, 3
Golden, William, 29
Great Britain and atomic weapons, 37-39

Groves, General Leslie R., 21, 22, 23, 26

Hickenlooper, Bourke B., 39, 40

Hiroshima, Japan, 21, 56

Hoover, Herbert, 9, 12, 13, 50

[60]

Humphrey, Hubert H., 25-26

Hyde Park Agreement, 37, 38

Hydrogen bomb, 7, 44

Johnson, Louis, 5-6, 44

Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy, 39, 40

Journals, 32

Key West, Florida, 6, 41

Knox, Frank, 3

Korea, 56

Krock, Arthur, 13

Lilienthal, David E., 6, 8, 15-17, 18, 32, 41, 44, 50

Los Alamos, New Mexico, 22, 56

McMahon, Senator Brien, 10, 19, 39, 40

Manhattan District, 20, 23

Marshall Islands, 30

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 14

Memoirs, 26, 45

Men and Decisions, 1, 58

Murphy, Charles, 42

Nagasaki, Japan, 20, 21, 56

National Security Council, 44

New York, New York, 31

Nhu, Mrs. Ngo Dinh, 38

Nichols, General Kenneth David, 23

Now It Can Be Told, 21

Nuclear energy, the peaceful uses of, 48-49

Oppenheimer, J. Robert, 23

Pike, Sumner T., 8, 17, 18, 44

Polk, James K., 57

Public Papers of the President, 11

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 2, 15, 24, 26, 37, 38
Rosenberg, Ethel, 22
Rosenberg, Julius, 22
Rosenman, Samuel, 41-42

[61]

Royall, Kenneth, 30
Sandstone tests, 30, 31
Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, 2
Short, Joseph, 53
Smyth, Dr. Henry D., 19
Souers, Admiral Sidney W., 41
Spaatz, General Carl A., 30, 31
Stimson, Henry L., 3-4, 26
Strauss, Admiral Lewis L., 44
 atomic bombs used on Japan, views on, 54-56
 and the Atomic Energy Commission, 6-15
 as General inspector of ordnance, 3
 religion of, 4

Taft, Senator Robert A., 13, 50
Tennessee Valley Authority, 15, 16
Truman, Harry S., 1-2, 6, 24, 34, 35, 38, 40-41, 42, 52-53
 and the Atomic Energy Commission, 8-10
 atomic weapons, the custodian of, 35-36
 an evaluation of, 56-58
Truman Committee, 2

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and atomic energy, 33-35, 53-54
United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, 12

Van Buren, Martin, 57
Vaughan, Harry, 41

Waymack, William Wesley, 8, 17, 18, 19

