

Oral History Interview with Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski

This is an oral history interview held with Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski in Washington, D.C., on October 6, 1986 at 11:30 a.m. The interview is being recorded on tape and a copy of the transcript will be sent to Professor Brzezinski for his review. Representing the OSD Historical Office are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Maurice Matloff.

Matloff: Dr. Brzezinski, as we indicated in our letter of March 13, 1986, we shall focus in this interview on events and issues affecting national security and the Department of Defense, particularly during your service as Assistant for National Security Affairs in the Carter administration from 1977 to 1981.

First, by way of background, what were the circumstances of your appointment as Assistant for National Security Affairs? Do you recall who recommended you and how long and well you had known President Carter, Secretary of Defense Brown, and Secretary of State Vance?

Brzezinski: I don't know whether you would really want me to go into that. It is covered very fully in my book and it would save us a great deal of time if I would simply say that the introduction to Power and Principle, my memoirs, goes into that in some detail.

Matloff: Was the transition from the academic world to presidential advisor and executive official in the Federal bureaucracy difficult?

Brzezinski: No, in part because I was always policy oriented. I have always looked at my academic work as related to the realities of international politics. I would even say that in the ten years preceding my appointment

I increasingly shifted the focus of my academic work to what might be called practical application and policy oriented studies. Beyond that, I also have to add that I had had a certain amount of practical experience. I served in the Policy Planning Council in the mid 60s and I was a very active member getting around Washington. I was even in the White House quite a bit and the President quoted me, and so forth. I was Director of the Foreign Policy Task Force for Vice President Humphrey in 1968, which was, again, relatively and directly involved in national politics. I was Director of the Trilateral Commission, which was a policy-oriented and action-oriented group. So all of that, I think, gave me a degree of background which a more ivory tower kind of academic existence obviously would not have had.

Goldberg: Did you have any discussions with Henry Kissinger before you took over?

Brzezinski: I had known Henry for a long time, since the early 50s. I certainly called on him--he was still head of the Department of State--and we had a very good and helpful conversation. He warned me about various pitfalls of bureaucratic politics. I used to see him also when he was the incumbent. On occasion I came down to Washington to talk to him. So I had a number of contacts with him and some practical advice.

Matloff: How long and how well had you known President Carter and the Secretary of Defense Brown before?

Brzezinski: I had known Carter quite well for at least three to four years and, again, that's covered in my book. I knew Brown much more casually.

He was a member of the Trilateral Commission, so I got to know him through that commission and had, I felt, a good rapport with him, but I did not know him well.

Matloff: How about your conception of the role and of the priorities in this position when you took over? What was your initial conception of what the role would be, and of the important problems that you were faced with? Why did Carter state when you began this work that he did not want another "lone ranger"?

Brzezinski: That's an interesting question. First of all, the words of that phrase did not originate with me; they did not originate with Carter; they originated with George Ball. George Ball sent in a draft of a speech, at a time when he was campaigning, I suspect, for the post of Secretary of State, in which he used these phrases essentially as a way of attacking and singling out Kissinger. Carter picked it up because, I think, Carter thought it was good politics. Beyond that, I do suspect that Carter didn't want anybody running foreign policy other than himself, and that was a good way of putting down a marker to that effect.

Matloff: There were some differences in the handling of the role of the Assistant for National Security Affairs. This may be in your book, but I'd like to know some of your thinking, now in retrospect. Did you see this differently from the way it had been handled before? Did the President see this in a different capacity? Did he have a different view of it?

Brzezinski: I don't know whether the President really had a thought-through position. I rather doubt it. I think that the President did have a gut

feeling that he would like to be in charge. I was struck by his reaction to my comments on various candidates for the post of Secretary of State, in response to his request for characterizations of such possible candidates. When I mentioned that George Ball would be very assertive, a very dominant, take-charge man as Secretary of State, Carter made it very clear to me that he was not looking for somebody like that. When I emphasized the fact that Vance was a team player, Carter seemed to be much more taken by him. As to my own concept of the role, I guess initially I did have a somewhat naive idea that we would really be working like a team--the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and I--with me helping to smooth the process and to provide the coordination but in the context of what might be called collective team effort. I think that my concept of the position changed, once certain geostrategic differences, if you will, within the administration started to emerge, and it became clear to me that you couldn't run foreign policy from any single department. You could only coordinate and run it from the White House. Then I began to feel increasingly that the post of National Security Policy Advisor has to be preponderant.

Matloff: There was a shifting of your thinking as time went on?

Brzezinski: That's right.

Matloff: How often did you meet with the President? How close were you?

Brzezinski: I saw him several times a day. I was the first official to see him in the morning and I had unlimited access to him. As a standard procedure, I could walk into his office any time, and at any point, whether he was alone or with someone. Obviously, if he was with someone, it wouldn't

be wise for me to barge in unless it was necessary. But there were instances even when I didn't ask, in the sense that I had to see him so I would walk in. Secondly, I had unlimited phone calling rights, so to speak. If I wanted to speak with him, all I had to do was to indicate on his line and I would be put through immediately, any time, both day or night. There was no one in between. For example, in the Nixon era, Haldeman cleared access. Kissinger had to go through Haldeman requesting access or phone calls.

Matloff: This was direct access.

Brzezinski: This was direct access, to treat people like that—myself, Ham Jordan, and, I believe, Jody Powell.

Matloff: Actually, he gave you cabinet status, as I recall.

Brzezinski: That is right.

Matloff: This is the first time, if I recall.

Brzezinski: That is correct.

Matloff: Do you remember why he did that?

Brzezinski: No. I don't know why he did it. I think that he did it out of a feeling of cordiality. I think that he also reacted rather strongly to the fact that at the first cabinet meeting someone put me against the wall, while the cabinet sat at the table. He noticed that and immediately reacted to that, and it was as a consequence of that that he gave me cabinet status.

Goldberg: What does cabinet status mean?

Brzezinski: Not much really.

Goldberg: It couldn't be statutory.

Brzezinski: No, it meant essentially two things: one, I did not sit around the wall in the cabinet room but sat at the cabinet table with the cabinet members during meetings; and secondly, in White House protocol at social events I was ranked higher than I otherwise would have been, having this so-called cabinet status. But it is symbolic, I agree.

Matloff: In your memoirs you made a very interesting statement that I'd like to quote back to you. You advised the President on a number of occasions, "You first have to be a Truman before you are a Wilson"--a marvelous quote. Two questions: what did you mean by the statement, and what was his reaction? You never said what his reaction was.

Brzezinski: His reaction was not very enthusiastic. What I meant by it was that Truman demonstrated to the American people and to the world at large a capacity for asserting forceful leadership, including the willingness to use power. And therefore he made both his leadership and American power credible. Wilson stood for international cooperation, world order, and an emphasis on peace. I felt that President Carter would do better in pursuing the latter goal, which was very congenial to him personally, if he first demonstrated credibility like Truman.

Matloff: Do you remember his reaction?

Brzezinski: As I said, he wasn't very enthusiastic, which means that he didn't agree. He never really became violent if he didn't agree with you but you could tell.

Matloff: I asked him the same question and I gave him your quotation. He kind of smiled and didn't say anything. You're right.

Brzezinski: Oh yes. He's terrific.

Matloff: In talking about the President, were there any outstanding differences on national security problems that you had with him? Did you in general see eye-to-eye with him?

Brzezinski: I would say that rationally he agreed with me by and large. Cerebrally he really felt that the advice that I was giving him, I think, by and large was worthwhile. In the final analysis, if he hadn't felt that way, he would have fired me. It was not controversial enough for him to have fired me. I think that emotionally he felt uncomfortable with a great deal of what I was stressing.

Did we ever have any disagreements? I might cite one major and one minor example. I think that he was not too happy about having to make a decision on the MX. I pushed that through the bureaucratic process. I ginned up the Secretary of Defense, who finally confronted the issue. I pushed the problem up through the NSC machinery for Presidential decision and he had to bite the bullet on it. I could tell that he was very unhappy. In fact, before we had the final NSC meeting, he and I were one on one reviewing the agenda for the NSC meeting and I told him that this was now going to confront him for a decision. He made it very clear to me that he was unhappy and that I was pushing him on it. I think that I was going to mention one more trivial example, but another major example perhaps was the neutron bomb. I think that was a misunderstanding between us. My understanding was that he wanted a decision prepared step by step, including consultation with the Europeans, and then brought to him for decision, when we felt the Europeans were ready and at least would give him token support.

In retrospect, I realize that his real intention was not to have to make a decision on it at all. He hoped the process would bog down somewhere along the line and he wouldn't have to make a decision. If he had told me that, I would have been able to arrange it in such a way that it would never have gotten to him. We could have stretched out the neutron bomb decision. I was against the neutron bomb's being dropped and felt that would weaken him, but if I had realized how adamantly against it he was, I could have stretched out the process so that he wouldn't have had to confront the question. The more trivial example in the national security area where we had disagreement was when the Mariel convicts were being dumped on the United States. I remember that I told Carter, "Why don't you just put one hundred of them on a boat, some old boat, bring the boat up to Cuban territorial waters, put it on automatic pilot, have the Coast Guard get off, keep the men in cages, run the boat ashore, and have American warships stand by on the edge of the territorial waters?" I remember that he was horrified by this idea.

Matloff: How did he see the role of the National Security Advisor vis-a-vis the Secretaries of Defense and State?

Brzezinski: I think that is a question that you really should ask him. I think he wanted his assistant to help him assert clear preponderance essentially and that's why there's ambiguity, because Carter wanted to be in charge. Clearly he didn't want the Secretary of State to be in charge. At the same time he was smart enough and practical enough to know he couldn't do it by himself. Therefore he needed someone like me. But the problem with me was that I was probably at the same time too visible to be able to do it on

some invisible little thing, which would have helped him be the predominant figure, without myself stepping out from under the Presidential cloak. That was the element of uncertainty in the relationship. Yet, at the same time, for example, he wanted me to speak up. He felt that Vance was not effective as a public speaker and wasn't projecting the Administration lines, that he wasn't being clear and convincing enough in projecting Carter's viewpoint.

Matloff: Did you perceive considerable growth of Carter's knowledge of understanding and capacity for handling international affairs?

Brzezinski: Very much so. Carter was a quick learner, hard study, and had a wonderful capacity for absorbing detail and getting out over the larger picture. Absolutely.

Matloff: Do you agree with the critics who feel that he spent too much time on detail?

Brzezinski: Yes, I do. And to some extent that was my fault, because initially I gave him a lot of stuff, not realizing that if you gave him something with underlinings on it he would read the whole thing anyway, and make marginal comments. Then, when he tried to pull back from it, it was very difficult because he had become accustomed to it. I also came to realize that he really didn't like the positions we made for him and resented it, and therefore wanted to be involved in decisions which essentially were of secondary nature. So I started pressing actually for either consensus among Vance, Brown, and me, or for kind of quasi-dictated decisions of the NSC process, in order to lighten the load of the President.

Goldberg: We have a quite remarkable contrast between Carter and Reagan.

Brzezinski: That's right. Incredible. Absolutely two opposites.

Matloff: Let me ask you about your relations with Brown since this has come up. What were your working relationships with the Secretary of Defense and with the top officials in OSD? How close were you with him? How often did you see him?

Brzezinski: First, we would have a weekly luncheon, which I initiated. We called it the VBB luncheon--later it became the MBB luncheon (Vance-Brown-Brzezinski or Muskie-Brown-Brzezinski). We would rotate the subjects for these luncheons among our offices so each of us acted as host. I would develop the agenda for it in coordination with their staffs and each of us would chair in his locale. I would see him [Harold] at the presidential breakfast, which was on Sunday mornings. I would see him three or four times a week, either at the SCC meetings, which I would chair, or at the PRC meetings, which either he or Vance would chair. I would also talk to him on the phone, I'd say once a day on the average.

Matloff: How did you handle differences between yourself and him when they arose?

Brzezinski: By discussion. On one-to-one he was very easy to deal with; in larger settings he was very prickly and always wanted to prove something, and have the last word. But I found him very easy to get along with, and by and large as time went on, we increasingly shared the same strategic position and the same strategic concerns. So I would, and did, consider him as an ally.

Matloff: How about when there were differences between him and Vance?

Brzezinski: Then I was usually with Brown.

Matloff: How about your dealings with other top officials in OSD?

Brzezinski: I found Duncan and Ikle to be tougher in terms of orientation than Brown.

Matloff: And with the other assistant secretaries?

Brzezinski: No, not much.

Goldberg: What orientation are you referring to?

Brzezinski: Tougher on defense, national security, arms control implications with the Russians.

Matloff: Your relations with the JCS, and with the Chairman, particularly when there were any differences in views within the JCS?

Brzezinski: That didn't percolate up to me.

Matloff: You didn't get involved in that?

Brzezinski: No, and Harold, very early on, specifically asked that all dealings with Defense be through him. He asked me that very specifically, and he asked me to convey that to the President. He also asked me to help him with the President, which I loyally did. I told the President that it would strengthen Harold's position if the President dealt only with Harold and respected that request. I did have some occasional luncheons with the JCS, just to keep in touch with them. I know that Harold was not too enthused about it, but he didn't object formally and I would keep him informed basically of what transpired.

Matloff: Then the differences didn't come up to you as differences. No JCS members would come to you saying they had a different view? You didn't try to get back to them?

Brzezinski: No. Although, for example, when it came to a push for a decision on the MX, or some other weapon system, I would talk to the Chairman of the JCS. On some of these issues they too tended to be a little more tough-nosed than Harold and in that sense, at the NSC meetings, there was a kind of informal coalition.

Matloff: I'll skip over relations with the State Department. How often did you see the Director of the CIA, Stansfield Turner?

Brzezinski: Again he would come to see me once a week for a private meeting, just with me. It was a very, very sensitive session. He was not admitted by the President, in spite of my best efforts, to the Friday morning breakfast. I asked the President to admit him. Stan asked me to help him. I brought him in once and the President wouldn't have him. I would participate in his once a week and then bi-monthly briefing of the President for half an hour; I would sit in on that. He would, of course, attend many of the PRC/SCC meetings since we usually had at least, I would say, three to four such meetings a week.

Matloff: Did the CIA reporting have to be funneled through you?

Brzezinski: Yes.

Matloff: Between military intelligence and CIA reporting, did you have more confidence in one over the other?

Brzezinski: No. There weren't really fundamental disagreements during our time. There were some disagreements in estimates of Soviet capabilities verification, but nothing as fundamental as apparently was the case in the early 70's. But, anyway, Harold would represent that point of view, if

need be. As I recall, it was not a major issue of contention among the principals.

Matloff: How about in dealings with Congress on national security issues? Did you get involved in that, directly or indirectly?

Brzezinski: A little bit in informal sessions. Chairman Zablocki of the House Committee would organize some informal meetings of the Committee so they weren't full sessions. I met with them. I also had some meetings with some Senators on that basis and some private meetings in my office with individual Senators, for example, Nunn and Jackson. But a lot of that was bitterly resented and contested by State. Vance felt very uncomfortable with my seeing people in the Nixon administration.

Goldberg: Why were you not supposed to testify formally?

Brzezinski: Because I was not approved by the Senate. Executive privilege-- they cannot call me to testify. I only testified once, when the President was away, during the ridiculous Billy Carter hearing.

Matloff: On this business of working relationships, every President, of course, has his own style of decision-making and you indicated in your book something about Carter's way of doing it. How much reliance did he put on the formal machinery on national security operations, how much on informal advice on the outside?

Brzezinski: I would say predominantly on the formal system, although there were informal elements in it. For example, he didn't hold that many formal NSC meetings on the Presidential level, as some other Presidents did. We would have the NSC system work through cabinet level committees, half of

which, roughly, I would chair personally. But quite often when it came for Presidential decision, instead of convening a full NSC meeting, he would use the papers I gave him with options and disagreements and then have a meeting with Vance, Brown, myself, Mondale, and sometimes Hamilton Jordan would sit in, and then make a decision there after discussing it further with us. So he preferred a formal process but culminating in a kind of quasi-formal and slightly more intimate setting than a formal NSC meeting, to which you would have to invite everybody else--the JCS Chairman, Director, CIA, and so forth.

Goldberg: Did Ham Jordan carry any weight on foreign policies?

Brzezinski: On foreign policy issues, no, unless they had some domestic political impact. He was, on the whole, quiet but he would sometimes weigh in with a private memo to the President. He and I would privately consult quite a bit and, as time went on, I found him helpful in trying to push the President into what I would call a more certain posture.

Matloff: If I can get into some of the topical and substantive issues--I know we are fighting the clock here. On perception of the threat to American national security when you assumed office, what was your perception of it and did it differ in any significant way from that of State or Defense?

Brzezinski: You know, I honestly cannot tell you now what concept of the threat I had. I had a feeling that our foreign policy was stalemated and things weren't moving, that the momentum of the early Nixon years was lost, so the arms control relationship was stalemated and the Middle East was

frozen. But when it came to the strategic military issue, I did not have a clear concept. I didn't feel that I really knew enough about it. One of the things that we commissioned right away was a comprehensive review of the threat—so-called PRM-10—which was an important undertaking and which led to some of the strategic initiatives that evolved, including my own initiative, for which I pushed very hard, and for which I am proud to take credit, the formation of the RDF. Then, later on, PD-59.

Matloff: Let me ask you a general question before we leave this general area. Do you recall whether you were more or less optimistic about the threat when you left office than when you came in?

Brzezinski: That's a good question. I was more concerned by then.

Matloff: More concerned.

Brzezinski: Not because of what we did or didn't do but because I had then a better understanding of the dynamics of weapons development, of the thrust of the Soviet momentum, of the nature of weapons coming on line, and also of the extraordinary delays in the U.S. system in taking positions, of the frittering away of lead times which our technological capability give us but within our political process we dissipate. I was struck by the fact that a number of weapon systems that would greatly have enhanced our security were so delayed by the Congressional process that in the end we were barely one inch ahead of the Russians.

Matloff: Let me, if I may, talk a moment about strategic doctrine and policy. I know these are matters which have been of interest to you over the years and you have thought much about them. How much of a role did you

play in the evolution of the American strategic doctrine while you were in this post of Assistant for National Security Affairs?

Brzezinski: If I may say so, the whole idea behind the concept, the notion of pre-positioning, of enhancing air and sea capability, of developing light divisions, really originated with my office, including, in the final analysis, even the name RDF. I remember once Harold said to me, "What should we call these forces?" Right off the top of my head I said, "Why don't we call them Rapid Deployment Forces'." We had really to push the Defense Department on this. I used to go to the President over and over again and say, "I don't believe enough progress is being made. Will you authorize a memo egging them on, or why don't you phone them up and say you want the latest report?" The second area was a strategic doctrine where a series of PDs were issued regarding the survivability of government, C³I, civil defense, culminating ultimately in PD-59, which was written exclusively in my office. Much of the work was done by Colonel (later General) William Odom. We then sent it over to Defense for revisions and for adjustments, and Harold worked on it. We specifically stuck in words such as "counter-vailing doctrine" because they were associated with Harold's public statements. We felt we would be gaining his support and eventually approval by the President.

Matloff: Let me take you back for a moment to PD-18 and the role that you and your staff may have played in connection with that. That phrase that is often quoted, "essential equivalence," in the strategic competition with

the Soviet Union—why that phrase? Why not the usual phrases of "superiority," "parity," or "sufficiency?"

Brzezinski: I forget where the phrase "essential equivalence" came from. It might have been Harold's.

Goldberg: It sounds like it. He has used it.

Brzezinski: Yes, I think it may have been Harold's. It was just used. It seemed to catch the ambiguity and yet the essentiality of the situation.

Matloff: This was essentially an interagency compromise, was it not?

Brzezinski: Yes. PD-18 was kind of an early compromise, when things were still in the process of shaking down.

Matloff: You were pushing for the rapid deployment force?

Brzezinski: Yes. That's right. It was in the early phases of that.