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Oral History Interview

with

General Maxwell D. Taylor
Army Chief of Staff, 1955-59
Chairman, JCS, 1962-64

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by

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This is an Oral History Interview with General Maxwell D. Taylor, held on Oct 18th, 1983, at 1:30 PM in Washington, DC. Participating are Dr. Maurice Matloff, Dr. Richard Leighton, and Dr. Robert Watson of the OSD Historical Office.

Matloff: The General has very kindly lent himself to this interview.

I should like to start this off by taking you back to your role as Chief of Staff and to your appointment to that position. Do you recall what instructions were given to you, either in written or in oral form, and by whom, at the time you were informed that you were going to be the Chief of Staff?

Taylor: To my surprise nothing of a formal nature was given to me. I made two trips to Washington from my command in Tokyo. On my first trip back, I had no idea that I was being considered for Chief of Staff, or that Ridgway was on his way out. On that occasion there was some effort to determine how I got along with civilians, whether I bit them, or they bit me, or what. That visit was largely with Secretary Wilson. Later when I had apparently become Chief of Staff elect, so to speak, I made similar rounds to the Secretary and to President Eisenhower. On the latter occasion I greeted President Eisenhower as an old friend and he was warm with me. From my point of view, we had had a very happy relationship in World War II and afterwards when I was at West Point. I don't recall that Secretary Wilson had anything to say at that time; he had apparently satisfied himself that I was acceptable.

President Eisenhower gave me a lecture, that was rather surprising from and to an old soldier, about obeying orders, the importance of team play, and that kind of thing. I had been expecting guidance of a strategic nature. At one point I tried to move the discussion in that direction and into the field of past military policy and learn what he wanted, but I don't recall that he even came back directly to these subjects. He was stressing team play.

Matloff: You mentioned General Ridgway. Were you aware of Gen. Ridgway's problems as Chief of Staff?

Taylor: I knew of them indirectly. I had been away in the Far East for a long time. I knew Matt extremely well, and I knew his views on military policy. Had I been asked if I agreed with Gen. Ridgway on specific military subjects, I couldn't have said yes or no about the current intricate issues in the Pentagon. But I certainly knew the man as a leader, and I also knew, in general, his thoughts about the importance of conventional weaponry and his doubts about nuclear weapons.

Leighton: While you're on the point of the little lecture you got about civilians, General, did that surprise you? I ask because, as you probably recall, one of the things that Gen. Ridgway himself was very punctilious about was the duly constituted authority of his civilian superiors, and to my knowledge he never challenged that in any way.

Taylor: No, of course, he wouldn't.

Leighton: So that the fact that both Sec. Wilson and the President should, in a sense, lecture you on the subject surprised me, when I read it in your book.

Taylor: After I became familiar with the whole scene, I realized that the really bitter fighting had occurred between Radford and Ridgway. I'm sure that he [Radford] reported to the White House that Ridgway was a most unsatisfactory Chief of Staff.

Matloff: Then I take it there was no correspondence or discussion with Gen. Ridgway on his problems as Chief of Staff before you came to Washington to take over.

Taylor: None. While I was still in the Far East, a cable told me that some of the senior officials wanted to talk to me, presumably about Far East matters. So I came back. I was very much mystified when Matt Ridgway did not meet me at Andrews Field. Secretary Bob Stevens, who was there, immediately started talking about appointments here and there. The Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Bolte was also there. So I saw Bolte before I saw Gen. Ridgway, and he said very frankly, "This is a mysterious trip you're making; we can't answer any of your questions; we don't know why you're here."

Matloff: Let me ask you about the problems that you faced when you took over as Chief of Staff. What did you regard as the main problems, and how did you see your role at the beginning? And did that role change while you were in office as a result of the problems or any other developments?

Taylor: By that time, I knew pretty well what Ridgway had faced, what he had done, and what he hadn't done. It distressed me to find the Army in the dog-house at the White House, especially when a good friend of both Ridgway and myself was the President of the United

States. So throughout my four years I was trying to adjust my position in a way that would not offend the President, but would hopefully be pleasing to him. Once, in much later years, I told his son John, "John, one of my regrets is that apparently I disappointed your father as Chief of Staff." Maybe to make me feel good, he replied, "Don't feel that way; he always said nice things about you." "In fact," John added, "if you were critical of him as President directly or indirectly he wouldn't give a damn, but if you had said that he ran the war in Europe badly, the red would really come out on his neck and ears."

Matloff: How much did the services know about each other's capacities and operations in the 1950s? Did the leaders really know about the problems and the programs of the other services?

Taylor: When you say each of the services, you mean the Chiefs of Staff?

Matloff: Yes.

Taylor: Know of what?

Matloff: Of each other's problems; of each other's operations; for example, did the Navy Chief of Staff of Staff know what the problems of the Army were in this period?

Taylor: Oh, yes. I brought back from the Far East a document, of which I was really proud then, and still am, as a national policy program. It contained my personal thoughts, without the benefit of internal staffing. After arriving in the U.S., I turned it over to the Army Staff telling them, "Tear this document apart, I want to hear what's wrong with it." This was because I proposed to use this paper in-house as the Army objectives and wanted to get a thorough critique of it. In that sense

I pushed this on my colleagues. Later, when satisfied with it I provided copies for Sec. Wilson and the Joint Chiefs.

Matloff: You have written that you found your four years as Chief of Staff as a period of "Babylonian captivity," a wonderful phrase. Would you elaborate on that view?

Taylor: It was certainly clear that in the White House and the Pentagon the Army was the number three service, particularly in budget considerations, and that the budget always allotted essentially the same percentage by service every year. I often said in the National Security Council, when these things were being discussed, that I didn't know, or pretend to know, what the perfect budget should be, but that I knew it couldn't be right in its frozen state which implied that for four years the world hadn't changed and neither had our military policies.

Matloff: Since you've come to the budget, let me raise this question. What did you think were the dominant influences on the Defense budget in the period that you were in office?

Taylor: The fact that the President of the United States had a great concern for the national economy and insisted on keeping down military costs.

Matloff: Basically it was the economy, rather than strategic considerations?

Taylor: He was the greatest economist in town when it came to the service budgets.

Matloff: Along the same line, what was the effect of the vertical approach to budget making that the services were following in this period?

Taylor: It was so obviously not the way to do it. The Army, the Navy, and the Air Force each were given a certain annual sum of money and allowed to do those things that they certified as necessary for their service, but no examination was made of a given multi-service capability, such as air defense. All three services did something in air defense but no one ever added the parts together and said, "Is this enough?"

Leighton: Don't you think the New Look, in some respect, did attempt to do that, General?

Taylor: Well, that was such an appealing policy to so many people. It pleased almost everybody, including the President, because it promised the biggest bang for a buck, as the saying went. It was certainly satisfying to those services in which the air component was the important weapon.

Matloff: We were asking about the vertical approach to budget making.

Taylor: There was no change. When everyone is happy in the Pentagon, except one service, obviously things don't change. I'm proud to say that my position, expressed in The Uncertain Trumpet, was eventually seized by President Kennedy and that resulted in a change.

Matloff: I gathered from your writing that you felt that the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a corporate body played no part in the budget making.

Taylor: To no degree worth mentioning.

Matloff: But why, in 1960, did Secretary McElroy refer the budget to the Joint Chiefs?

Taylor: I really can't say because I left the Pentagon in 1959. This was a hard question. To participate in the budget making is a life

work in itself. During my time as Chief of Staff I was opposed to the idea of making the Chiefs sit down, go over every item in the budget, and then defend or criticize it before Congress.

Leighton: Did you have any contact with Assistant Secretary McNeil, the Comptroller?

Taylor: I knew him both as an official and as a friend. He was a very fine man. As the first of the DoD Comptrollers, he should be given a great deal of credit for what he accomplished. In some quarters he was suspect as a retired Admiral.

Matloff: That brings up the question of your relationships with other people in OSD and on the Joint Chiefs. Did you have relationships, other than with McNeil, in the OSD?

Taylor: My most important contact with the civilians in OSD was in the frequent meetings of the Armed Forces Policy Council, which consisted of the Secretary of Defense, the service secretaries, and the Chiefs of Staff. The civilians usually had a roomful of their supporters or assistants at the Council meetings.

Matloff: Which brings up the question about your relations with the other members of the Joint Chiefs and with the Chairman, Adm. Radford. What differences developed between you and the other Joint Chiefs and with the Chairman--differences of views, strategy, or whatever?

Taylor: There were many differences among the service chiefs but no hard feelings. I could not say the same for my relations with Radford. He was different, a very difficult man.

Matloff: I was speaking of intellectual differences, differences over strategy and the like.

Taylor: I made no apologies for being an Army man representing the position of the Army; that's what I was paid for. I could see the different points of service view very clearly, but many times could not agree.

Matloff: How deep did the schism get over massive retaliation by 1956?

Taylor: Well, in the first two years, 1955-56, the lineup was normally four for massive retaliation and one against, namely, Taylor. After Radford departed, during my third year, then the Navy and Marines came over, pretty generally for Flexible Response, so we finally had a three to two alignment, the latter being the Air Force and the Chairman (Twining).

Matloff: Whom did the Secretary of Defense usually back when there was a split in the Joint Chiefs?

Taylor: The Chairman, since he supported massive retaliation. Incidentally, the President of the United States once volunteered to me the following: "Charlie Wilson, dammit, I can't get him in to do his work; he wants me to solve all his problems." That was certainly true. Charlie knew that he didn't know a great many things and looked for help to the President or, if he was not available, to the Chairman.

The President didn't want to get splits; nor did Charlie. I can well imagine Radford had been told to get these Chiefs to agree come hell or high water.

Matloff: How about with Congress? How did you handle the problem, when you appeared before congressional committees, and knew that your

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views differed, say, from the other Chiefs, or even from the Chairman?

Taylor: Yes, but it was no great problem. It was a thoroughly understood ethic of all the Chiefs not to volunteer to Congress a view contrary to that of the Secretary, but if asked by a Congressman as to a contrary view, a Chief was expected to tell the truth and did. It wasn't very pleasant sometimes, but no one ever criticized me for that kind of behavior.

Matloff: You referred before to the coolness that developed between you and the President. It's also in your book, The Uncertain Trumpet.

How did that show itself, and how deep do you think it was?

Taylor: I never felt that it was personal coolness. I just knew that my trumpet wasn't sounding the right tone to please the President. He never bawled me out, or anything like that. He would look at me hard, when he talked about, "I want to see all you men play together on the same ship--you know that if you're together, you're much more effective than split,"--which is certainly true.

Matloff: Do you recall the reorganization in the Defense Department in 1958?

Taylor: Yes, but not in detail.

Matloff: I was wondering if you favored that.

Taylor: Yes, I did.

Matloff: Did you think it had any important impact on the organization?

Taylor: It at least made it possible for the Chiefs to have a military staff to serve them. Previously, we had a group of committees of limited military use. For example, in the course of Lebanon affair, as Chief of

Staff, I found myself writing field orders to troops preparing to go to the Middle East. Going back to my office, my deputy said, "I never expected before to see a Chief of Staff perform the functions of an operations sergeant."

Leighton: Among other things, that reorganization did strengthen the authority of the Chairman, didn't it?"

Taylor: It did, and of the Secretary. Both were desirable.

Leighton: They should have been? You agreed with that, in spite of your differences with Radford?

Taylor: I do. One of the best things in the reorganization was to take the CINCS out of the hands of a service. Before the Army had viewed Europe as its area of interest and the Navy had a similar view of CINCPAC. When a CINCPAC once committed an outrageous offense and I wanted to bawl him out, I could not get agreement.

Matloff: Did your advocacy of the single Defense Chief and the elimination of the Joint Chiefs, as it was then organized, lead to any coolness with the other Chiefs? You had written that you felt that there should be a single Defense Chief.

Taylor: I don't recall having taken that position before writing The Uncertain Trumpet after retiring.

Matloff: Let's talk a little about the perception of the Soviet threat. What was the dominant attitude toward the Soviet threat that you found when you came into the position of Chief of Staff? Was your view of it pretty much the same as that of other people in the Defense Department, or did you have a different view?

Taylor: We were certainly not as alarmed as we are today. We were seeing pretty clearly the direction in which the Soviets were going. The case of Berlin, for example, provided a good insight. So in a sense we recognized the danger, but it was not a preeminent source or fear.

Matloff: Did that view change later on, when you became Chairman?

Taylor: Yes. Of course, Sputnik had created a lot of concern before that. The reasoning was that if the Soviets could have put up a Sputnik at great expense, they would have first taken care of the military needs of the rocket field.

Matloff: Did your view, then, accord with that of the other Chiefs, that the threat was more serious after Sputnik?

Taylor: It was plausible that these people could do things that we never thought they could. Dick Groves [Gen. Leslie R. Groves, head of Manhattan Project in World War II], who was a close friend of mine, maintained the Soviets couldn't get a nuclear explosion for five years after ours, but they beat it by two or three. Hence we were foreseeing the enormous effort they were willing to put in all forms of military power, when they suddenly popped up with Sputnik. It provided later ground for the Kennedy missile gap, which seemed quite logical to me.

Matloff: You felt that there was a missile gap?

Taylor: After I started to work for President Kennedy, every so often, he would ask, "Who ever believed in a missile gap?" I alone held up a hand.

Leighton: Kennedy believed in it, too.

Matloff: Can you elaborate a little on why you felt that way?

Taylor: The logic of the belief in the Kennedy Administration that the Soviets might have long range missiles with nuclear warheads was based on knowledge that the Soviets had adequate nuclear material for the warheads and if they could build a Sputnik they could surely produce missiles able to deliver the warheads. Also the Kennedy Administration had U2 photography to give us a much broader picture of Soviet military activities. I had no difficulty in believing in a missile gap.

Matloff: So there was apparently a change of view because of better intelligence?

Taylor: Yes. Photographic intelligence was most valuable.

Matloff: Can we turn to a subject which I know is dear to your heart, strategy and strategy-making? Who in the Department of Defense was primarily influential in strategy-making in your view during your tenure as Chief of Staff. Was it the Joint Chiefs? The services? Who?

Taylor: I will answer that, by strategy, I mean the use of military force to achieve national objectives; i.e., national strategy. The answer to your question is nobody.

Matloff: Nobody?

Taylor: Nobody.

Matloff: No strategy was being made?

Taylor: There was a volume put out every year by the NSC.

Leighton: You mean the Basic National Security Policy?

Taylor: That's right.

Leighton: BNSP.

Taylor: It ought to have been, and purported to be, the official statement of the President as to his international objectives and the possible dangers that might arise. But the language was far too vague to indicate what the President was really thinking about. It was of little use in formulating a military policy and strategy to carry it out. Regardless of what the BNSP contained, our military policy in general terms was Massive Retaliation.

Matloff: My next question was going to be, how closely did the President and the SecDef follow the development of military strategy?

Taylor: Their interest in military strategy depended on current issues. Strategy was simply a series of decisions made on a current problem and the actions to execute them. "Current" might be something expected to happen five years from now. But such things were never put together. No attempt was made to formulate a military strategy covering the next five years, and its impact on all the services.

Matloff: So there was no integrated military strategy.

Taylor: No.

Matloff: How about the services? Did each service make its own, at least?

Taylor: Each service had a set of programs which, if funded, would give it the means to acquire men and equipment for the kind of war in which it was interested. Sec. of State Dulles should have been interested in the Massive Retaliation-Flexible Response conflict going on in the Pentagon but wasn't. I tried to get him to come over and see what kind of forces were provided

for his foreign policy. And he finally came over, but he never took a stand on military budgets and things of that sort.

Matloff: How about the origins of the New Look? We mentioned the New Look policy before. Did you have any view of how this New Look policy had come about? What had led to it? Was it purely the budget, or was there any influence of the British, or of the Air Force?

Taylor: I don't know. I've been over some of the biographies of Eisenhower without getting a clear picture. Radford said that it was adopted because of a briefing he gave the new President in Honolulu, which put all the emphasis on the importance of the Navy and Air Force, and in a way that appealed to Eisenhower.

Matloff: What was your view of the significance of the Korean War for the United States defense planning and policy?

Taylor: You'll find some comment in my statement which I have carefully prepared. Certainly, one of the lessons was the difficulty of waging a limited war at a great distance from home. Another was that much of our standard equipment was not adapted to that area and really became an albatross around the neck of the commander. We needed to know the Far East better and the ways of utilizing oriental manpower in support of our forces.

Matloff: In advocating the flexible response strategy, did you have the feeling before you left the position of Chief of Staff that you were having some impact on the administration? On Dulles, for example?

Taylor: Yes. When the Commandant of the Marines came on to my side of the table, something had happened.

Matloff: How about Dulles? Were you having any impact on Dulles at all?

Taylor: He certainly had a feeling of sympathy. In some of my other contacts I could see that they were pushing for conventional forces and pushing effectively. In the civilian world, there were some excellent writers who were going tooth and toenail down the line for Flexible Response.

Matloff: Which writers were you referring to? Kissinger and Osgood?

Taylor: Kissinger and Brodie. Yes. People like that. There were others.

Matloff: It's an interesting point, because most scholars have a feeling that it was Kissinger, Brodie, and Osgood that first thought about limited war.

Leighton: Kaufmann, too.

Matloff: Yes, Kaufmann also. But the story of the thinking inside of the Defense Department has never really been developed in terms of the timing.

Taylor: The fight had developed in-house without much leakage from the Pentagon. Bear in mind, Kennedy and his people were all reading the literature on the outside, and Kennedy came to office rated a conventional force man, perhaps more so than I was on some of these issues.

Matloff: What about the role of nuclear weapons in your thinking? Did you have any strong views about where they might fit in with your notions of limited war and flexible response?

Taylor: You have to bear in mind that in those days our nuclear stockpile of weapons was quite small. I might have a feeling we'd never need more

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than a hundred of these things, but we probably hadn't got to a hundred yet. So it was always building up to what we had to work with. The real battle or argument was whether it was possible to have tactical nuclear weapons. The Army insisted on trying to develop them, but in most of my time they were largely rejected as being too costly. But skilled scientists on the outside came to our side. It was thought on the outside that you could never have a weapon unless it weighed about a ton or something. So a great deal of battle was waged on that question. It was argued that the smaller they were, the more they cost and the less bang we got. That was an argument that inclined the economists to oppose it. That included the President.

Matloff: You were a strong advocate, I gather, of the anti-missile defense when you were Chief of Staff. Why do you suppose the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed this program?

Taylor: It cost money, and there was a considerable uncertainty about its reliability.

Matloff: How about a civil defense program? Did you believe that was important in the 1950s?

Taylor: No. I don't think so now.

Matloff: Let me go briefly on to NATO. What was your role as Chief of Staff in connection with NATO? Did you get into any of the problems of the buildup or of the strategy-making?

Taylor: Each chief was involved to some degree. We viewed Europe as the most probable seat of war, and we could see new applications

of the new weapons systems being developed by us and in the Soviet Union, so we all had an interest. I attended one or two meetings of the military leaders of NATO, which was not rare. The Chairman always attended, but if an issue were primarily naval, the CNO would go. So while a Chief was not nearly as close to it as the Chairman, you felt you were part of the family.

Matloff: How about the impact of your advocacy of flexible response?

Did that have any impact, while you were Chief of Staff, on NATO strategy?

Taylor: I don't recall any identifiable impact. That's a good question. NATO strategists were certainly aware that flexible response was an issue among us. We had talked about it to the senior officers in NATO, but I don't recall any institutional reaction.

Matloff: You wrote in your Swords and Plowshares volume that you were soured by your experience in the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Taylor: When you go to work for hours in a place where an endless squabble is going on, it is hardly pleasant. When Radford left, the environment changed a great deal although the issues didn't. Nate Twining was not as able an officer as Radford, but he was a good man to work for. He stood his ground, when his ground was important, but in a very pleasant way. He would rather have a friendly group around the table than a group just sitting there frowning at each other and not saying a word, which was frequently the case with Radford.

Watson: With Radford it was partly a matter of personalities as well as issues, then? Is that right?

Taylor: It was. No doubt. And also, McElroy was not insisting on a consensus of views among the Chiefs. We didn't have that battle which characterized my first two years.

Matloff: How would you compare the styles and the personalities of the Secretaries of Defense that you met up with, either as Chief of Staff or later on as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs? How did they impress you?

Taylor: The ones I knew?

Matloff: Yes, those that you knew.

Taylor: Charlie Wilson was far and away the least prepared for the job. McElroy had great potential, but he discovered that he had bitten off something so big he was not prepared to sit there and chew on it for five or six years. So his influence was not great. I was not around for Gates, but I had seen him in other roles, and he struck me as a very fine man. I was probably the only man in uniform who ever said that McNamara was the best Secretary of Defense that had come along. But I believed it.

I don't like to talk about my superiors, but everyone knew Charlie was thoroughly incompetent. Even Radford would say openly, "Mr. Secretary, you can't do this." It was really embarrassing for him to have to defend the Secretary. McElroy, of course, was quite a different individual. I thought that he was a very likeable, a very forceful man. Unfortunately, he came on the job with the understanding of staying only two years. He had no idea of the nature of the job he was taking on. You can never

know what it is to be the Secretary of Defense until you take it on. He deliberately sat back in his chair and allowed his subordinates to do most of the work. In evaluating past Secretaries of Defense, a great gap in the records results from the absence of those of General Wheeler, who served six years as Chairman during the Vietnam War. The loss of unrecorded vast experience deprived history of an important source.

McNamara--I presume he's going to take his hair down, or is he?

Matloff: We hope to get him recorded too.

Leighton: What little is left.

Taylor: He has a very important story to tell. He and "Bus" Wheeler worked well together, but they didn't always agree. I myself didn't know exactly what Bus thought on many subjects.

Matloff: Let me switch over in the remaining time that we may have to your role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, which is a story in itself. Did you find that your previous service connection as Chief of Staff proved to be a handicap or a help when you became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs?

Taylor: They should never have given me the job, if I didn't have that background. That was one of Radford's handicaps. He had never been a Chief; he never understood the problems of a Chief. So the answer is, a great advantage.

Matloff: Were the policy and strategy of the Kennedy administration clear when you took over?

Taylor: No, nothing's ever clear under our method of policy making. Every administration comes in dragging a ball and chain behind it,

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representing statements made during the campaign. The present administration is a wonderful example of that. As soon as in office, the new officials set about simply tackling problems as they come up, and solving them as best they can with no careful thought of objectives to guide them; objectives to which to return even if they are driven off course.

Matloff: When you were Chief of Staff, you certainly ran into lots of interservice rivalry. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, what did you and Secretary McNamara do to try to mitigate or soften the competition?

Taylor: I had the great advantage when I returned as Chairman, not giving a damn whether I got the job or not. I was still fed up with the Pentagon. But when I was propositioned by the White House, I had time to talk things over with McNamara. He was not a stranger, because I had seen much of him in the year and a half when I was in the White House. I said, "Bob, I want you to know, I really have no desire to come back to the Pentagon. But if I do come, I intend to adhere to the following: Number one: I would never take a black snake whip to try to drive unanimity into my Chiefs. I would obviously try to get agreement. We know we're stronger if we're not divided, but when we have an honest impasse we're going to blow a whistle, stop, take up sides and produce a document stating the positions of the disputants. Then I'll add my opinion and bring the decision to you." He said, "That's fine." When I took the job I told my fellow chiefs exactly the rules of the game. It was amazing how few splits we had. Why? Because they knew that I was very close to McNamara, that I would never bring a paper that the Secretary wouldn't support. So I had a great advantage versus the Chiefs.

Leighton: While we're at it, General, what do you think of the concept of a personal Chief of Staff to the President? Hitler had one, Kennedy had one, and you were his.

Taylor: When I agreed to come back to the Pentagon as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, President Kennedy said, "Whom do you recommend I put in your place?" I said, "Nobody." That job ought always to be filled by the Chairman, although it can never be filled as I had by virtue of my physical proximity to the President in the White House. I often heard him talk about things bearing on the Pentagon and could anticipate the advice he would need. Thus I could beat anyone in the Pentagon in giving him an opinion--not nearly as good an opinion as Gen. Lemnitzer, the Chairman, would give--but it would be in time, and that's a great advantage.

Matloff: That brings up the question of your relationship with President Kennedy when you were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Did you go directly to him, or did you have to go through the NSC advisor?

Taylor: When I left him, I did so with real sorrow, because I had a very warm feeling for Jack Kennedy. We were very real friends. I said, "I'd like to have it understood, Mr. President, that, if necessary, I can pick up a phone at any time and telephone you." He said, "Absolutely." How many phone calls did I make? Zero. I don't believe in cutting authoritative corners if it's not essential.

Matloff: How about under President Johnson, when he succeeded? Did your working relationships change with the White House?

Taylor: Not so much, because actually Lyndon Johnson didn't change much. Further, he was well acquainted with military matters by virtue of membership on the Senate Armed forces Committee.

Matloff: How about when you were Chairman? Did the role that you played in strategic planning change in any way?

Taylor: I didn't work as hard as when I was Army Chief of Staff. I have often told junior officers that ask me questions, "If ever you're told you can be Chief of your service or the Chairman, take Chairman any day." Actually I must say, in seriousness, that while you work harder there is more satisfaction in heading your own service.

Matloff. You felt you had greater impact, I gather.

Taylor: As Chairman you're working in a broader field. You're really in the field of national strategy most of the time. And the Chairman is the only man in uniform who has an opportunity to get his words regularly to the President.

Matloff: Can we touch on the Cuban missile crisis, about which you have written very eloquently and fully? Did you follow the same procedure in that EXCOMM [Executive Committee of the National Security Council] that you wrote about, of presenting your own views as well as those of the other Joint Chiefs?

Taylor: Yes. I think that my colleagues on the Joint Chiefs of Staff would all agree to that. But they'd sure sweat me down when I'd come back after a long day with the President wanting to know exactly what happened, why it happened, and what's going to happen tomorrow.

Matloff: Did you discuss your views and those of the Joint Chiefs with McNamara and/or Gilpatric before you went to the EXCOMM meetings? Did they know what position you were going to take?

Taylor: I don't recall ever taking a view to the White House that was contrary to that of the Secretary or the Joint Chiefs without their knowing it. If in a debate at the White House I advanced a personal view, I would remind the others present, "Gentlemen, this is Taylor speaking and not the Chiefs," and then give whatever point I wanted to make.

Matloff: What lesson did you come away with about Soviet leadership and decision-making from that experience?

Taylor: There's not much to report. I will say that when Khrushchev's first cable came in, the evening of Oct. 26, a long, almost incoherent cable, my reaction was that either his nerves had broken, or he had had too much vodka. Nonetheless, we were very happy with it. Then, the following day we received a second cable that sounded more like the authentic voice of the Politburo. But Kennedy cleverly decided to ignore it and use the first one as the negotiating paper.

Matloff: Let's turn now the other way around. What did we learn from the American decision-making process?

Taylor: We had little to regret in the Cuba missile crisis.

Matloff: How about the Bay of Pigs?

Taylor: We learned more from the Bay of Pigs, because it was so obviously disastrous. When all was over, the President directed me to have a post-mortem meeting in the White House of the principal participants and decide

what they had done wrong. In that case, virtually everyone admitted to have erred seriously. Yet essentially the same men, a little over a year later, steered the Cuban missile crisis and did right.

Matloff: I was wondering what had been learned? Apparently, even though the decision-making process was improvised during the Cuban missile crisis, it still seemed to be working better. I was wondering why that was so?

Taylor: Yes, it was because the President knew what he wanted accomplished--to get the missiles out of Cuba--and his staff knew how to work as a team in carrying out his wishes. We did have some trouble keeping him out of our staff work until we had the options and our recommendations ready for presentation.

Matloff: This raises a question which I wanted to pose to you. After the Bay of Pigs, as I read the story, the instruction given to the Joint Chiefs by President Kennedy was to look at questions more broadly, transcending purely military considerations, and President Johnson later on continued the same instruction. Did the Joint Chiefs feel comfortable or uncomfortable with this broad mandate?

Taylor: What happened is this. After the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs, the attitude of the President to the Chiefs was cool at the least. Finally he decided on May 27 to call on the Chiefs at the Pentagon and explain what he expected from them. Fortunately, I had been thinking along similar lines and could provide him with a draft on the subject of the responsibilities of the Joint Chiefs in the Cold War.

At the Pentagon the President made the following points: He viewed the Chiefs as his principal military advisers and wanted their advice to come to him directly and unfiltered. He didn't want that advice to be deliberately limited to military advice because he viewed the Chiefs as more than military specialists capable of helping him integrate all his resources in solving his broad problems.

This historic statement was made the text of a National Security Memorandum issued in June 1961 and respected during the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

Matloff: Probably the same instruction was given by the President when the limited test ban treaty came up, too: that the Joint Chiefs look at this proposition more broadly than from the purely military standpoint. You felt comfortable with that?

Taylor: Very definitely. I was. I never liked the phrase, "from a military point of view". That's unfair to the President, whose problems have many aspects.

Matloff: If I may, General, I would like to direct your attention to Vietnam during the period when you were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. If you want to go further, or back, that's fine too. What did you feel was at stake for American security in Vietnam during your tenure as Chairman?

Taylor: I can't narrow my views to that period. In May 1961, President Kennedy had the National Security Council examine the importance of

the Vietnam policy and its objective. It concluded that the U.S. objective in Vietnam was "to prevent Communist domination of S. Vietnam; to create in that country a viable and increasingly democratic society; and to initiate, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions to achieve this objective." Pres. Kennedy and all his officials supported this statement of policy which, so far as I know, was never rescinded in the Kennedy, Johnson, or Nixon administrations. I always acted in accordance with it.

Matloff: How about the differences between the State Department and the Joint Chiefs on the question of Diem? The Joint Chiefs, I gather, supported Diem. The State Department for some reason, except for Rusk, did not.

Taylor: The Secretary of State did. His underlings had no authority.

Matloff: Right. Rusk seems to be the exception in State.

Taylor: I would say that President Kennedy was unduly generous in dealing with his associates on this subject. He did not insist that those who said "We can't win with Diem" added with whom we could win.

Matloff: I take it that you felt that the passing of Diem was a very important step in American policy.

Taylor: It was a turning point in U.S. policy, a real disaster and an unnecessary one.

Matloff: It meant more for American involvement eventually?

Taylor: Yes, it certainly was the cause of it. I was asked in the period after Diem's murder when I was ambassador and the situation was very grim, why didn't I recommend that we pull out before we got in deeper?

I replied, "There are at least two reasons. I have just heard the content of the Tonkin Gulf resolution, approved by all but two members of Congress, which seemed to say to Ambassador Taylor, 'Taylor, you are trying hard in the right direction, but pull up your socks and do better.' The other reason was my guilty conscience, the feeling that our troubles were largely created by our part in the Diem affair. Hence we had an obligation to stay with South Vietnam until we made good on our word."

Matloff: Would you care to comment on the role of the press and reporting from Vietnam, this old question which has come up so often, and which has taken up a good part of the writing on Vietnam?

Taylor: A good part of the press in Vietnam was committed to the failure of U.S. policy there. Now I think we should have declared war and imposed censorship.

Matloff: I know that you and Secretary McNamara tried to get some senior press people to go out and do some reporting.

Taylor: And some came, but accomplished little.

Matloff: Can you recall why American officials seemed to be optimistic in 1963 that the war might be over by '65 and that we could pull out?

Taylor: Yes, I know what you're referring to. It was part of our pressure on Diem to get him to do certain things, which, if done, we believed would make possible a termination of the situation in about 2 years. So on one of our trips McNamara and I were charged with telling Diem, "Unless you do certain things we have described, we are going to pull out in a relatively short time. If you cooperate and we do what we have in mind,

there can be a satisfactory and timely ending for both of us. I still think that it was a fair proposition and fair estimate.

Matloff: Now we come to the question that's always asked. In retrospect, would you regard Vietnam as a defeat for us?

Taylor: Not a military defeat. It was a defeat of national policy that we're still paying for.

Matloff: The question arises, why did we fail in our national policy? Any thoughts on that?

Taylor: Because, in simple English language, we abandoned our purpose. We walked off the battlefield and left our ally to an unnecessary defeat. We promised to stay with him to the end. See what happened--the greatest disgrace in our history.

Matloff: The desertion of the ally, you see it.

Taylor: Absolutely. I don't know how it can be viewed otherwise.

Matloff: How about the factor of American public opinion? Was that taken into sufficient account by the policy makers?

Taylor: No, it was certainly bungled. But I was never sure what the public opinion was. I made a hundred and thirty-four speeches in the United States on the subject of our policy between 1965 and 1970; sometimes in seminars with newspaper people, sometimes to hundreds of college students, sometimes to businessmen. And only two or three times did I encounter animosity. But there were many questions like: "Why don't we know these things you're saying? Why are we so confused by contrary explanations?" This was evidence of the failure of public policy.

Matloff: The question also comes up about how can other Vietnams be avoided? Any thoughts on that score?

Taylor: We can decide what are the national interests that would warrant the expenditures of resources on the scale of Vietnam. I would certainly have not gone into this one if I had known what the cost would be.

Matloff: Do you still feel that the limited war option is important, in spite of the experience in Vietnam?

Taylor: It depends on what the national interests are and where they are. By the way, what is a national interest? It should be so important to the nation as to justify the expenditure of resources at a specified level. If the level is limited war, that option becomes important.

Matloff: Let me try a few general questions. On cold war policies--did you believe that containment was a realistic policy?

Taylor: It may or may not be realistic depending on circumstances. Is it a sound national interest? If it meets that test and the cost is tolerable, containment may be recommendable.

Matloff: On the basis of your experience, another very general question: How do you view military aid as a tool in the Cold War for American policy? Has it been effective?

Taylor: First again you must weigh the national interest. There's no generalized answer to the question.

Matloff: How about the notion that some historians have advanced--the revisionist thesis of the Cold War--that it is American aggressiveness that is accountable for the origins and development of the Cold War;

that the communists have been reacting to the American policy; and that aggressive American economic policies are as much a cause of the Cold War as anything the Russians may have been doing.

Taylor: I'm not quite sure I get that--

Matloff: Let me rephrase this. There is a school of thought, particularly among leftist historians, that the cold war is as much a product of American actions as anything done by the communists.

Taylor: I don't buy it.

Matloff: Let me ask you on the question of OSD management and organization, as a result of your experience as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and your long distinguished experience in the Defense business, how do you see the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and of the Chairman? What weaknesses do you see in the Department of Defense organization?

Taylor: The success of our military policy depends very greatly on the the relationship among the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs, with the Chairman considerably above the other Chiefs in importance. Because, even though the laws and regulations are not ideal, if that team really works well together, and then links with key men in Congress, you have nothing to fear in the national security sector. Unfortunately, there have been many weaknesses in what I call the DoD-JCS system. I'll just cite a few without defending them. We have already touched on a good many of these. The first one I would cite is the following: there is no adequate way at the top of government today, or ever has been, to correlate national policy, military policy, and military

power. Number two: there has always been inadequate military advice in policy formulation at the level of the President and the Secretary of Defense. The Cuban Missile crisis, where the Joint Chiefs were deeply involved, is the only exception I can cite. Then there is an absence of clear distinction between the Secretary of Defense in his two hats--indeed the fact that he has two hats is seldom recognized. In his first hat, he is Secretary, at the head of a great Department, and a member of the Cabinet who reports to the President in the same channels as the other department heads. But he also has another role, which is rarely mentioned or defined, in the chain of military command. I discovered only two or three years ago that his role in this position is a member in the National Command Authority, where he is something of a deputy to the President as Commander in Chief. In time of war the Secretary of Defense in his secretarial role would be one of the most hard-worked officials in government. He would be generating the additional military forces to wage the war and to sustain the armed forces already in existence. That alone is a full time job. Should he also be in the chain of command where he would command all the forces in the field in the name of the Commander in Chief? Certainly FDR would not have run World War II with this setup. I am not prepared to say how it ought to be done, but we should recognize the existence of a major problem here, and decide what should be done. A lesser point--the Secretary of Defense has no military staff to support him in his functions in the chain of command. Hence, when he is working in this shadow area, he has to borrow the Joint Staff, and the Joint Staff is not organized for the task.

Because of the defects in correlation, we have never had a truly rational military budget that's task-effective. A rational budget, like a rational policy, should be so constructed that every dollar in the budget can be justified because of some contribution to creating and maintaining forces capable of certain military tasks, recognized as essential to the national security. Such a budget would require a review of present roles and missions of the Services which date back to 1947--a horrifying thought in many parts of the Pentagon.

Matloff: I might ask one more question, if you don't mind, General, before we leave. Looking back on it, what would you regard as your major achievements as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

Taylor: If you will take a frivolous reply, I might say that a major achievement was my part in persuading Curtis LeMay to support the limited test ban treaty.

Matloff. The question has been raised whether any pressure was put on the Joint Chiefs by the Administration to back that measure.

Taylor: There's always some, in the sense that senior civilian officials want you to do something and tell you why you ought to do it. There's nothing sinister about it. It's the duty of the civilian leadership to put this pressure on those things they think important. If the military allow themselves to be shoved around unreasonably, they ought to lose their jobs.

Matloff: Do you regard that as a major achievement of yours?

Taylor: It's the way I tried to behave.

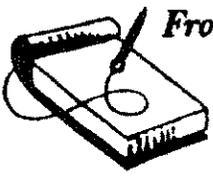
Matloff: How about the other side of the coin--anything that you didn't quite complete that you would have liked to do?

Taylor: Review the roles and missions of the Services.

I proposed that shortly before I was made Ambassador to Vietnam but nothing came of it.

Matloff: You have been very kind, and we certainly appreciate your willingness to have us ask these questions and to give us your time.

6/3/84



From the desk of

MAXWELL D. TAYLOR

Ref. your letter 5/31/84

Mr. Goldberg:

~~As for access to our
interview, I prefer Category 2~~

Maxwell D. Taylor

Page determined to be Unclassified
Reviewed Chief, RDD, WHS
IAW EO 13526, Section 3.5
Date:

MAY 01 2013

(Administration)

May 31, 1964

General Maxwell D. Taylor, USA (Ret.)
2500 Massachusetts Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20026

Dear General Taylor:

Thank you for returning the corrected transcript of your oral history interview with Dr. Maurice Matloff and other representatives of the OSD Historical Office. You have done a fine job of editing that will make the transcript all the more valuable as an addition to the record of the important events and issues in national security to which you contributed.

On the original page 13 (copy enclosed), you raised a question about how to interpolate your answer to a question raised by Dr. Matloff. He has deleted the question from the final version and moved your bracketed portion on the rest of that page to the last paragraph of the new page 18 and continuing on page 19, where it appears more relevant. We trust that this will be agreeable to you.

We are enclosing a copy of the final version of the transcript incorporating your emendations and the above change for your files.

As I have indicated in our previous correspondence, the information contained in the transcript is intended primarily for use in the preparation of a history of OSD. We shall, of course, follow your wishes in the matter of future access to your interview. Four categories are normally in use: ~~Category 1 - open; category 2 - permission of interviewee required to cite or quote; category 3 - open only to OSD historians; and category 4 - permission of OSD historian required.~~ Please indicate what your wishes may be in the matter.

We appreciate very much your cooperation with this project. A self-addressed envelope is provided for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Alfred Goldberg
OSD Historian

Enclosures
as stated