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Interview with William J. Perry
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Trask: This is part two of an oral history interview with former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, taking place at the Pentagon on October 22, 1998. Participating as interviewers for the OSD Historical Office are Alfred Goldberg and Roger Trask.

Mr. Perry, we want to begin this afternoon with a question concerning your appointment as secretary of defense early in 1994. What were both the circumstances and the process that led to that appointment?

Perry: The circumstances were that President Clinton decided that he needed a new secretary of defense and asked Les Aspin to step down, which Les did. The president went through a process that must have been torturous, trying to decide who the successor should be. Apparently his choice was Bobby Inman. In fact, he announced Bobby. I actually made a trip to Texas to meet Bobby to start laying out plans of action for when he came on board.

Goldberg: You knew him pretty well, didn't you?

Perry: I knew him very well. I thought he was a good choice. I was pleased with the choice and busy making plans with him on how we would work together. The week after my trip down there he made an announcement that stunned me and everybody else. The net of it was that he was not going to take the job.

Goldberg: What did you think of the manner in which he accepted the job initially?

Perry: I don't know the circumstances. I think he was not seeking the job and was pressured pretty hard. He agreed to do it reluctantly but never quite bought on to it. I do not know the circumstances that caused him to finally back out of it.

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Trask: He said when he was appointed that he hadn't voted for President Clinton and in effect said he didn't agree with some of his policies. I thought at the time it was odd that a nominee for a position would speak the way he did, even when he felt that way.

Goldberg: He gave the impression that he was conferring a great favor on the president and the country.

Perry: That is the way it came across. I don't think Bobby intended it that way. He was trying to make clear that he was not seeking the job and was perhaps drafted to do it. Something happened between the time he accepted it and the time he made his announcement. At the time I visited him in Texas he was fully planning to come on board. The issue of his reluctance never came up in that discussion, but he pulled out only a few days after that. So something happened, perhaps to do with comments he was getting from the media. I'm only speculating.

Goldberg: He felt that people were out to get him.

Perry: He mentioned that but did not give any details. That put the president back to square one.

Goldberg: Inman's performance was remarkable and bizarre. I listened to it.

Perry: I did too, and I was stunned, not only at the decision, but at the way he described the decision.

Goldberg: And he hadn't given you any inkling of it before?

Perry: No. I had been with him just a few days before and we discussed how we were going to work together. To this day I remain friends with Bobby and we have collaborated on other business ventures.

A few weeks after that the president called me and asked if I would consider taking the job. We had a discussion of what the job would consist of and how I would relate to the

president and the Cabinet officers. I told him I would think about it and get back to him. I talked it over with my family and basically decided I didn't want to take the job. I called the president and declined. Everybody seemed to think that was the wrong decision.

Goldberg: Whom do you mean by everybody?

Perry: Everybody in the White House involved with the decision, as well as many of my colleagues in the Pentagon. I spent a long weekend in meetings with people trying to persuade me it was the wrong decision; that culminated in my going to the vice president's house for an afternoon discussion with him. He wanted me to lay out the reasons I didn't want the job so he could try to allay my concerns. A big part of the concern was that I knew if I took the job I would be surrendering my personal life and my privacy. There was not much he could do to allay my concern about that. I had been close enough to the job to see that was a fact.

Goldberg: It turned out that way, too.

Perry: Yes, but that was no surprise. Basically he persuaded me that notwithstanding that, it was something I owed to the administration and the country to do.

Goldberg: That's the ultimate argument, isn't it?

Perry: Yes. I went back and had one more big discussion with my wife and took a deep breath and decided to go for it. I was very reluctant. In fact, when I said "no" I thought I had disposed of the issue.

Trask: Did you make the conscious decision when you took the position to stay only through President Clinton's first term?

Perry: Yes. I told President Clinton that I would only stay for one term, but that I would not leave in the middle of the term. I would stay through the term unless staying in the job became a problem for my health, marriage, or integrity. It wouldn't have anything to do with financial aspects,

being under pressure, or finding the job uncomfortable. I could envision circumstances where one of those things could arise. I had thought about that, it was not an off-hand decision. I still think that I could not do the job effectively for eight years; probably no one could.

Goldberg: No one has.

Perry: Two people tried [McNamara and Weinberger], but their second terms were much less effective than their first. I have my theories of why that is true, but whether or not it is correct, the experiential data was clear. At the end of the term the president raised the question of my staying another year. I didn't think that was a good idea; whoever took the second term ought to be there from the beginning of the term.

Goldberg: What are your views about people serving long terms?

Perry: My observation and reasoning on that was that, and to a certain extent it is probably true of all Cabinet positions, your exposure to the press, the media, and the public puts you in a more specialized environment than most people. One of the problems in that is that you begin to believe that the reason people pay so much attention to you is because of who you are rather than because of the position you occupy. It tends to warp your perspectives. You tend to get committed to the things you have done in the past couple of years, so that when you are not succeeding it is hard to go back and revisit them and rethink them. I think people develop an inflexibility precisely because of the goldfish bowl in which they operate; that warps their perspective. I wasn't sure that I would continue to make the right kind of judgments and hard decisions after some number of years. Four is not a magic number, but it was clear that eight was far too long. The second problem, unrelated to the first but to my mind even more serious, is that of all the cabinet jobs the secretary of defense had a particular problem in that he had a function unique from all the other cabinet officers. He signed the deployment orders. He was

the one who actually dispatched people on dangerous missions, from which some would not come back alive. I had always made it a principle when I was in office that when someone was killed on a mission and brought back to Andrews Air Force Base, I would go out and meet the coffin; talk with the person's family and explain to them how important that mission was. While it could never make up for the loss, they should at least understand that he died for a good cause. To me it was important on the one hand to make the decisions about whether people should go on missions, as objectively as possible, and on the other hand when the people were actually killed on a mission to be very subjective about it, to meet with the families so that I could feel the consequences personally. It's a balance that every secretary has to make. Having made that balance, it allows one to look both at the objective policy reasons for sending 25,000 troops into Bosnia as well as to relate to the subjective aspect of the risks involved and what the personal losses were going to be. Those kinds of judgments I thought I could make for four years; I doubt if I could make them for eight years. The pressures of making those judgments would build after a while.

Goldberg: But yours wasn't the final judgment. You signed the deployment order, but obviously it was a matter of others being very much involved in making the decision.

Perry: Certainly I sought advice from every source I could. In particular, I made no decisions without having careful and detailed advice from my military advisers, particularly the chairman. And if there was a large deployment, involving many thousands of troops, the president had to be involved and had to make the ultimate decision. But I was the one who signed the orders to send the troops out there. If I did not agree with that judgment I could not have signed that order. So in that sense it was my final judgment and if I didn't agree with it, if it was not a

deployment I could support, I could not sign those orders. So each time I had to make that decision at a very personal level.

Goldberg: It was a very draining experience, both ways.

Perry: Yes, it was.

Trask: Did the president, vice president, or anyone else lay out any agenda or expectations for you? Was there anything specifically that they talked about?

Perry: As I started the job there was no grand plan laid out. Remember, I had been the deputy for the previous year, so I had been following the agenda very closely. We had some specific discussions about what the big outstanding issues of the day were, relative to defense decisions. Bosnia was still very much up in the air at that point. It was clear that we had to have some kind of judgment about what we were doing there. Haiti was up in the air. Both of those were issues where there was conflicting advice going to the president. Some were saying we should get into the Bosnian war on the side of the Muslims. Others were saying we shouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. We ended up doing neither of those, but something in between. But it was clear that it was urgent to come to a judgment about what the right course of action was there and trying to work our allies into a position where we could do that. So it was quite clear from the beginning what the principal security defense issues were that needed early resolution.

Trask: Did they, in talking to you, make any comments about Aspin's term as secretary of defense?

Perry: Not really, because I had been involved. It wasn't as if I was a new person coming into the job. I was working as his deputy for that year. I had attended many meetings with him and had gone through some of the problems that he was having. It was clear to me that the

president was personally fond of Les and that this was a very difficult decision that he had made. He made that clear in a number of different ways. It was also clear that he felt he had made a mistake asking Les to do this job. In his judgment it was the wrong assignment; he should have found some other position for him. He had let the fact that he liked and admired Les influence his judgment and put him in what he had come to consider the wrong job. It was a very difficult decision for him to do that.

Trask: When you entered office, what was your conception of your most important responsibilities, and did you have an agenda in your mind?

Perry: Yes. First of all, I believed that I had to get right how we used and threatened to use military force. There were three or four immediate issues facing us on that, with Bosnia and Haiti being two particular examples. But I saw that as being a continual problem and issue, the first thing facing a secretary. It's only the most important problem in that if you don't get that right, nothing else is going to work.

Goldberg: You are acquainted with Caspar Weinberger's views on the subject and his discussion of it and his six points?

Perry: Very acquainted with that. But even if I had agreed with his six points, which I didn't, they did not necessarily provide full guidance for dealing with each particular issue. I looked at those six points and they didn't tell me what to do about Bosnia, even if I bought them all. Two principles he had that I fully believed in and which both Colin Powell and later General Shalikashvili strongly reinforced and supported were: when you send your troops over for a task you must have clarity of mission. They must know why they are there and what characterizes success. That should be decided ahead of time. Second, you should go in with overwhelming force. Don't try to get by with the least possible, but err on the side of having too much. When

we went into Bosnia, NATO went with more than 50,000 troops. It became quickly clear that that was more than we needed. But had the right number been 35,000 and we had gone in with 25,000, it would have been quickly clear it was not enough. That would have been a bad lesson to learn. The price of oversizing the force is bearable, the price of undersizing is not.

Goldberg: When we talked with Secretary Weinberger, he made the point that in the Grenada operation in 1983 he told the Joint Chiefs to double the size of the force.

Perry: I did not have to tell General Shalikashvili that when we went into Bosnia. He and General George Joulwan pretty well sized the force at 50,000. They told me that they thought that was on the conservative side and I was satisfied that it was. I did not have to jack up their figures.

The second task that I set out for myself, which was not a conventional task for the secretary of defense but one peculiar to the time in which we lived, was to do everything I could to reduce the nuclear legacy from the Cold War. We and the former Soviet Union were still sitting with 50,000 nuclear weapons. There was no longer the danger of a nuclear exchange or holocaust, but there was a real danger associated with having that many deadly weapons scattered around the world, particularly in the nations of the former Soviet Union that were in a state of social and economic turmoil. That was a very high priority I was going to deal with. I spent a lot of my time, energy, and resources doing just that. We did succeed in eliminating more than 4,000 nuclear weapons in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, in just that one four-year term. That program is still ongoing. The more important aspect was setting up the process by which we started bringing those down, not just getting rid of those 4,000 weapons.

The third task I had was to make a dramatic reform of our procurement system, the acquisitions system.

Goldberg: You had started on that as deputy secretary, hadn't you?

Perry: I did. I actually started on it earlier than that. I had been the under secretary of defense for research and engineering. I could have done it then, conceptually, but I didn't. Looking back on it, I don't think I could have. I don't think the conditions were right for success.

Goldberg: You were aware of what Frank Carlucci did as deputy secretary in that regard?

Perry: Yes, but I was guided more by what David Packard tried to do when he was deputy.

Goldberg: What did you think of Carlucci's performance? His initiatives?

Perry: I have a high regard for Carlucci's performance in general, but I don't think his initiative on acquisition reform got to the core of the problem. I formed an opinion about that even before I came into office. When we had all the procurement scandals in the early '80s, President Reagan set up the Packard Commission. Out of that commission came strong support for what became the Goldwater-Nichols reform of organization, which I think was a tremendous achievement. The second thing that came out of it was a blueprint for changing the procurement system. It went much farther than Frank tried to do. Basically, in the Packard report we said that we should go over to commercial procurement and whenever possible buy commercial products. It was a dramatic change in the system. That was set on the shelf, because Secretary Weinberger did not agree with that approach. Later on, when I came back to office, first as deputy and then as secretary, I pulled it off the shelf and began to implement that plan. Unlike Dave Packard, I had four years to make it happen and had the plan already in my hand when I came into office. That was a primary objective of mine, to really make a reform of the acquisition system.

Goldberg: Isn't it surprising that Weinberger in a Republican administration would not have found that an appealing approach?

Perry: It is. I think it stemmed back to Cap not agreeing that there was a problem to begin with and being somewhat resentful of the president for setting up the Packard Commission and imposing it on him. He never supported the creation of the commission and therefore was not really predisposed to accept it.

Goldberg: Also he was disposed to go along with the military, perhaps.

Perry: That's right. In those days the military was not supporting the commission. By the time I became deputy, I had anticipated a lot of objection from the military and from the procurement experts in the building. That turned out not to be true; they were ready for change at that stage and the military was pushing me in that direction. But when I was under secretary in the late 1970s I don't think I could have pulled it off because among other things the military was not ready for it. By 1993 they were ready for it. We had the blueprint and charged ahead on that and made a huge impact. But much more remains to be done.

The fourth objective I had was to begin the task of formulating a new security structure for the post-Cold War era. As I saw it, our basic security policies dated from the period 1945-52, when in response to the beginning of the Cold War the leaders--Marshall, Acheson, George Kennan--put together the strategy that became the Cold War strategy, defined in the simplest possible terms as massive retaliation-containment-deterrence. It took four to six years to formulate those in clear terms so that everybody understood and got on board, but for the next forty years we were just executing that policy. How we executed it changed from administration to administration, but nobody questioned that policy. None of those were appropriate policies for the era after the Soviet Union broke up, so we needed a whole new national security policy. I did not believe in the three years I was secretary that I was going to be able to create that

whole policy, but I knew I could get a good start on it. So I did. When I took the job as secretary I went in consciously with those four objectives.

Goldberg: On the last objective, changing national security policy, you obviously had to deal with others--in the State Department, the assistant for national security, and so on. Was that a collaborative effort, then?

Perry: There were some issues in which the Defense Department could and did take the lead, but putting together a national security policy involved Defense, State, and the national security adviser working closely together. Certainly implementing that policy required working together. It was my observation that that is much truer in this era than it was during the Cold War. Once the policy had been created, in the '50s through '80s, Defense and State could go their own ways and didn't have to work so closely together. They didn't, typically. It was the exception rather than the rule when the secretary of defense and secretary of state worked closely in collaboration. I can think of many instances where they hardly spoke to each other. But that's not possible in today's era. The strategy that we need to deal with today's security problems requires close collaboration between the secretaries of state and defense and the chairman. They all have to be able to work with the White House, which means with the national security adviser, too. So the price of noncooperation between the secretaries of state and defense perhaps was an acceptable price during the Cold War period, but it is not an acceptable price today. If I was the president, I would not accept my secretaries of defense and state not working with each other. I would replace one or both of them as the need might be. It is too heavy a price to pay today.

Goldberg: How was this changed policy promulgated? What form did it take? In earlier years we had NSC papers and statements, etc.

Perry: It was a work in process, so it wasn't so much about promulgating, but creating. The promulgation of what I consider to be a statement of what is new about our security policy I am just now writing. I didn't have time to write it when I was in office. I am basically codifying policies that I evolved in collaboration with the secretary of state, the White House national security adviser and others, when I was secretary of defense. I call it "preventive defense." The book that I have just written on that subject will come out in a few months and will describe the strategy, which was the fourth policy initiative.

Goldberg: You have had time to write a book?

Perry: Yes, in collaboration with Ash Carter. The book is at the publishers now. It does the best job we can do of not only articulating this strategy, but giving examples of how it was formulated and applied during the time I was in office.

Goldberg: Was the State Department very much involved in all of this?

Perry: Yes and no. In some aspects they were, in some they were not. Applying this policy to Bosnia, for example, required working hand in glove with State. We had State negotiating the Dayton Agreement, which was the agreement that got us into Bosnia. Bringing us in to write the military annex of the Dayton Agreement, which described how the military force would be used in Bosnia, was a very close collaboration between Christopher and me, between Holbrook and me, between Holbrook and Shalikhshvili; all of us worked together quite harmoniously in putting that together. Other aspects of it, such as getting rid of the nuclear weapons, was done under the Nunn-Lugar program, which was a Defense authorization and appropriation. The State Department applauded and supported us, but that was a Defense Department initiative.

Goldberg: Did you have a close relationship with the secretary of state?

Perry: Yes, I did. We were friends to begin with, we had known and liked each other for many years. That was a good beginning. We both quickly discovered that our staffs were used to fighting each other as a means of protecting us. We had to convince them that that wasn't the way to protect us. Their job was to work cooperatively with each other—that was the best way they could support us. I think after five or six months that message got across and the two staffs did work together very well. Similarly, there has been a tradition of the civilian leadership in this building not always working well with the military leadership. There again, that bubbles up from the staff, each trying to protect its own boss. Shali and I laid down the law on that very early, that not only were we going to work together, but we expected the assistant secretaries and three-star generals to do the same. Happily, Shali and I had compatible personalities, and his principal Joint Staff officers worked very harmoniously with the key assistant secretary I had in policy. That was a very happy and an unusually good working relationship.

Goldberg: Another factor could have been that you had better quality officers on the Joint Staff.

Perry: Partly as a consequence of Goldwater-Nichols. I mention that parenthetically, but I state explicitly that I was a great beneficiary of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, and so was Shali. It wasn't just the law itself. Somebody had to implement that act and make it clear that we were serious about it. I give great credit to Colin Powell and later to Shali for being the chairmen who seized that legislation and made it a reality. By the time I was secretary that was well launched. I only had to encourage it, not do groundbreaking work to make it happen. I call myself the beneficiary of it rather than the initiator.

Trask: With all the technical background you had as well as your earlier positions with the Department of Defense, did you feel you were completely prepared to be secretary of defense?

Perry: No one is completely prepared to be secretary of defense, but all of the background that I had was very useful. None of it was wasted. Having been the under secretary of defense for research and engineering, I had the technical background that allowed me to relate and direct that aspect of the work effectively. But most importantly, it instilled in me the notion of how important that was, so that I went out and recruited a first-class team to do that. I pretty much let them do it, I wasn't overseeing. When you get people like John Deutch and Paul Kaminski as under secretaries, it does not take a lot of hands-on management. All they have to know is the general guidance and they just do it. I had a first-class technical team working for me, which made that part of the job easy. As for the policy aspect, many pundits were postulating when I became secretary that I would be floored with the policy aspect of the job. That was a misunderstanding of my background. Even when I was the under secretary for research and engineering I worked very closely with our policy people. For the entire twelve years I was between the two jobs I was working at the Stanford Center for International Security. In fact, I was the co-director of that center for the last five years, specifically doing defense policy and security policy. I came into the job with much more background on policy than most people appreciated. What was new to me was managing the personnel aspect, particularly the military personnel aspect. I had no background in that, other than having been an enlisted man in the Army, which allowed me to identify and sympathize with their problems. Within months of becoming secretary I became convinced that was one of the most important aspects of my job, so I added a fifth objective to my four policy objectives.

Goldberg: You had some experience as under secretary with the military, you had to deal with them, didn't you?

Perry: I had, but I was never responsible for management of the personnel system, dealing with issues such as compensation, quality of life, how to make the All Volunteer Force successful, how to be sure we had the best recruiting program, all were new to me. Within the first six months I decided that had to be one of my most important objectives. I worked very hard at that and spent more of my time on that than I ever imagined I would. The technique I evolved for dealing with that problem was getting direct assistance from the senior military NCOs of each of the services. They are called the senior enlisted. Each of the services has a E-10, who is the top enlisted man in that service, just as the chief of staff is the top officer. He spends most of his time travelling around to the military bases trying to get inside information on what the enlisted people are thinking and how well the training is going. I quickly decided that was a hugely valuable resource that I ought to tap into. My first thought was that I would schedule meetings with them every month, but I later decided to go with them to the bases. I asked each one of them in turn to schedule a meeting at one of the bases, take me along, and bring the other services' senior enlisted with him so they could learn a bit from the experience, too. So the five of them, my military aide, and I would arrive at a base, the commanding officer would come out and shake hands, and then he would exit. We would never see another officer while we were at the base. This was the sergeant major's show at the base. They would demonstrate training; we would have rap sessions with enlisted personnel and some senior NCOs. Over a period of two years I developed some real insight, basically derivative from what the senior enlisted were getting. On the plane rides there and back I would be listening to them. Out of that example came the Quality of Life Program. I became convinced that the capability of our military services today rests more than anything on the quality of people we have and the training they have. We first of all need a good recruitment program, a superior training

program, and a way to retain them. I found that we were in danger of losing people, which would demolish the main tenet of our All Volunteer Force if we lost good people after one term. The payoff of the Quality of Life Program was the high retention rate.

Goldberg: Had you been in favor of the All Volunteer Force in the beginning?

Perry: No. I didn't follow it closely, and didn't consider that I had an informed opinion on it. That wasn't my field. My offhand opinion was that there was a risk in the All Volunteer Force of getting mercenaries that were not connected with the people. In a democracy that was a danger. In fact, it has not turned out that way. I think the public feels closer to their Army today than they did during the '70s when we had a draftee Army. They are prouder of the Army today. If you visit our bases, you find out that those people are quite representative of the general population. Since this was different from what I expected, I asked myself what caused the change. The best I can determine is that two big factors made a difference. One was the leadership of the services, particularly that of the Army. Those young officers who decided to stay with the Army after Vietnam decided to transform it. They set about consciously and deliberately to transform the Army. The one that I knew best, and who I thought was most representative of that, was Max Thurman, but any one of the three- or four-star generals in the Army today were part of that experience. They provided the leadership that made the All Volunteer Army work. The second critical factor was that Sonny Montgomery and a group of congressmen got together and passed a new GI bill. It's effect was not only to attract people into the service, but also to attract people who wanted a college education but couldn't afford it. Here was a way to do it by signing up for four years in the Army. It attracted a high quality of people from high school, so that the input to the services during the '80s and '90s was a much

higher quality and more representative of the public as a whole than anyone would have expected.

Goldberg: There were some disproportions, weren't there, of ethnic groups, for instance?

Perry: There are, but not as much as people had thought. It's because the ethnic groups, blacks in particular, are overrepresented in the poorer end of the population and therefore most need some assistance to go to college. We were getting a higher percentage of blacks and Hispanics than the total population, but they were people who had already decided they wanted to go to college. When I went to the bases, the question I asked hundreds of young people was "Why did you sign up for the Army, and are you going to reenlist when the time comes?" I got a wide variety of answers, but the one common thread was they wanted to get an education. The training plus the GI bill gave them a chance to make something out of themselves. Many of them went back to civilian life after one or two terms, but society benefits from that, too. Others, who had in mind going back to civilian life, decided they liked the service and instead reenlisted, and society won both ways--by having a better trained military service and by having well trained people go back into civilian service. I pinned a medal on Sonny Montgomery, because I thought that the Goldwater-Nichols Bill and the new GI Bill were the two greatest pieces of legislation that I had to work with. A third one was Nunn-Lugar, which I used for the purpose of getting rid of the nukes.

Trask: Although perhaps not a tradition, it seems that the secretary of defense is the outside man and the deputy secretary is the inside man. That doesn't seem to be characteristic of your administration; you appeared to be both an inside and outside man. Did you know the distinction before?

Perry: I thought about this ahead of time. With both of my deputies, John Deutch and John White, I described the job to them and we carried out the job as if they were going to be my alter ego. I was going to be outside and inside and they were going to be outside and inside. I emphasized outside more than inside, and they emphasized inside more than outside. I traveled to 67 countries.

Goldberg: You traveled more than any other secretary we had.

Perry: That meant I was out of the building a lot. Whoever was in the building had to be able to deal with the policy issues that came up while I was gone. He could call and talk with me about them, but nevertheless he had to deal with them. I felt that for a deputy to be really effective he had to be capable of doing the secretary's job, both inside and outside. It turned out that both Deutch and White liked the idea of being able to function as a secretary. They went on trips to China and Russia, also. They attended policy meetings, sometimes in my place, sometimes with me. Oftentimes I did things like working with the GIs on trying to get these quality of life programs, which most people would think was the deputy's job.

Goldberg: What disposed you to appoint Deutch to the job of deputy?

Perry: I had known and worked with Deutch for many years, probably two decades. I believed that he was then and is now one of the most capable managers that I know. He's a real action oriented person, he gets things done. I believed he was complementary to me in terms of things he liked to do and was capable of doing. I believe we had common views about what we were trying to do, we shared the same goals.