

Interview with John J. McCloy

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The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOHN J. MCCLOY

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Q: — things like that, recollections from people who were active that far ago. Your association with Mr. Stimson and so on during the war, and your recollection of Mr. Johnson is important. You do think that he was a sort of a fair-haired young congressman at the time with Mr. Roosevelt?

McCLOY: Yes. As I say, my recollections of and my contacts with Mr. Johnson were primarily concentrated in the period of his presidency and also during the Kennedy Administration when I saw a good bit of him when he did have a very important role in the Senate.

Q: Your connection was largely with disarmament in that early part of the Kennedy Administration.

McCLOY: In early part in the Kennedy Administration, I was called on by Mr. Kennedy to set up and organize what later became the Agency for Arms Control and Disarmament. Mr. Kennedy in his campaign and later had — I guess it was either in the Inaugural or the State of the Union message — made a great deal of disarmament. He asked me to undertake the organization of the agency that was to deal with disarmament. At that point there was considerable question as to where it ought to be sited. But it was clear that

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whatever was to be done would require legislation; that even though it might not become a completely independent government agency, there were powers that they wished to give it that would require legislation. So I helped draft the bill.

Then, suddenly, early on in the Administration, somewhat to my consternation, Mr. Kennedy told me that he was sorry but he couldn't give this bill the full Administration support he had intended, that it was something of a controversial item; and that that early in the Administration he didn't wish to risk a setback; and therefore he couldn't put it on his "must" list as he had some other legislation of deeper significance. This surprised me because of the vigor with which he had endorsed this concept in both the campaign and, as I say, whether it was the State of the Union or the Inaugural — I forget at the moment. It was either one or the other.

I asked him what he wanted me to do about it. He said, "Well, I want you to talk to some of the leaders about it and see what their attitude is." He had them for breakfast, and I believe Mr. Johnson was the head of the congressional delegation that came up. At a given point I was asked to expound on what the possibilities of this agency might be and the importance of arms control and disarmament. I did the best I could at that point.

I think it was somewhat after that that he told me that in canvassing the leaders they felt that the legislative item was a little too doubtful to risk the prestige of the presidency that early in the administration. Now, whether he got that advice from Mr. Johnson, I don't know. I had something of an impression that he had, but I may be wrong about that.

But at any rate, I was taken "aback" by that, and I know that I didn't have very enthusiastic support from Mr. Johnson at that point. I think he was doubtful about it — doubtful as to how independent it ought to be; as to where it should be sited; and a number of other aspects of it had caused him concern. I believe at that time he talked with Senator Russell about it.

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But be that as it may, when the President said, "But if you go ahead, I won't interfere with your going ahead with it. You organize the case for it in the government and go over the list of witnesses and so forth. But you, so to speak, are largely on your own."

So we had the hearings. At that time, of course, I had been more recently out of the War Department, and I was familiar and knew all of the military leaders during World War II. Most all on a first-name basis with me. So I simply went out and got most of the military heroes from World War II to testify in favor of the legislation.

Q: That's a good way to overcome opposition.

McCLOY: You name them. From Eisenhower down, name a prominent military figure - I had him! And they went up there. It was interesting, with all this talk about the military/industrial complex now. It was the military in my judgment that put the disarmament agency over. The civilian support was not as significant.

Q: Put the Disarmament Commission over.

McCLOY: Put the Disarmament Commission over. As a result of it, the legislation went through with a very substantial majority. The military testimony was most impressive. Mr. Kennedy thought I was a tremendous lobbyist and an effective legislative figure. But it wasn't that I had any acumen in that art. It just happened to be that I was able to get the interest and the attention and the testimony of that group of witnesses. And, as I say, the vote was rather strongly in favor of it. There have been intermediate votes in terms of where it should be placed and the amount of authority it should be given that were fairly close. But there was never any doubt from the beginning after that testimony was in. That testimony was given not only to the senate, but the House. The testimony was given to both the appropriate House and the Senate committees.

Q: So that passed pretty much without executive help.

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McCLOY: It didn't pass with any executive help. There wasn't any pressure coming from the White House, but it went through with a wide margin. And at that point it must have gotten Mr. Johnson's support somewhere along the line.

Q: At least not his opposition.

McCLOY: I didn't sense his opposition. I'm not sure that at any point that he was the chief adviser of the President on this matter in regard to the President's attitude, but I did feel that he'd had some real doubts about the possibility of its passing in quite the form that we had envisaged it.

Q: You wouldn't count yourself among his close associates — no close contact?

McCLOY: No, I didn't know Mr. Johnson at all well. I remembered one or two contacts with him during the war when there were some important issues on the Hill, although I wasn't the chief legislative figure in the War Department at that time. I was the Assistant Secretary in charge of Military and Political Affairs. But it was political-military affairs rather than domestic-political affairs, although I had had to testify frequently on the Hill in regard to measures that we needed for the prosecution of the war. And in connection with that, I remember running in to Mr. Johnson from time to time. I had the impression then that he was sort of the white-haired boy amongst the Southern Democrats so far as the White House and Mr. Roosevelt were concerned.

Q: A good position to be in.

McCLOY: Yes. He was a factor, but not the important factor that he later became. I can't at this time think, without checking back over a lot of records, just what measures I did take up with him. They were not many, but they were intermittent. He always gave me the impression as being a man of force and decision. And my general impression was that he was thoroughly cooperative insofar as my interests were concerned, as with those of the

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War Department and the war effort and getting on with the successful completion of the war. But my contacts weren't very close with him at that point.

I come back to the Kennedy Administration. Then from time to time I'd see Mr. Johnson when I was called down there in various advisory capacities. I remember meetings of the Security Council, or what was left of the National Security Council that Mr. Kennedy saw fit to continue with. They were some fairly hot issues from time to time — the hottest of them being the Cuban affair, on which I was called in.

Q: Was Mr. Johnson always present—?

McCLOY: Johnson was almost always present at those meetings. I got the impression that he was not an active participant in them.

Q: Sort of an observer.

McCLOY: Observer. He sort of sat in the rear. I remember thinking one time, “Well, I'd like to hear from Mr. Johnson,” but he didn't seem to speak out very forcibly. However, he followed it all very closely. I've no doubt that his advice was sought outside of the room and that he was disposed to listen and to observe rather than to participate actively in the more public discussions.

Q: But he wasn't excluded over?

McCLOY: Not excluded at all. Oh no. He was always present so far as I recall. It was always as a matter of course that he seemed to be there. I won't try to review all that tense period of the eyeball-to-eyeball encounter when those missiles were in Cuba. But I remember seeing him then and I remember talking to him after the meetings were over. I remember thinking he hadn't expressed himself on it, and I wondered what his viewpoint was. And I'd go up and talk to him.

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Q: Did he express them to you privately?

McCLOY: He was a little reserved, I thought. He was a little reserved about it. But no reason why he shouldn't be, because I wasn't really in the government then. I was just called in from the outside, and he was much closer to the chain of command than I was.

But you always had the impression that he was thinking hard and was following every nuance of the discussion.

Then after Kennedy's assassination, the first contact I had with him was when he got me on the telephone and told me that he wanted me to become a member of the Warren Commission to investigate the circumstances of the assassination. And he got me down there for that purpose.

Q: Did he have to convince you that you ought to do that?

McCLOY: No. I don't think he did. It was a very emotional period, and it was so obvious that something like this had to be done. He made it appear to me over the telephone that he was anxious that a little group be gotten together who would command the respect of the people, and that we should go into the thing with absolutely no holds barred, and to come out with all the facts and take all the testimony we needed because he sensed the historical implications of it. He told me that he had quite a difficulty in getting Warren to agree to act, and he told me who he was appointing to the committee. I think the only persons that he spoke of at that time as other members he had in mind were Senator (Richard) Russell and (Cong.) Hale Boggs.

Q: Congressional representatives.

McCLOY: Yes, the congressional representatives. So I agreed over the phone to do that.

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And then we had a meeting with him in which, again, he emphasized that we had carte blanche and that we were going to have all the power we wanted to have to make this investigation, and he gave us a very good authoritative send-off.

Q: He didn't continue his direct involvement with the commission after it started its work?

McCLOY: No. Once he gave us the mandate we — at least I — heard no more from him. I'm sure Mr. Justice Warren may have spoken to him from time to time, but I got the impression from my own membership on the committee and what Mr. Justice Warren as Chairman had to say to us from time to time that the President gave no further direction to it. It was simply “find the facts and report them.”

I think he may have had closer contacts with Senator Russell, and probably did. But there was no indication of any pressure at all.

Q: Was that Commission, in your opinion, allowed to do everything that it wanted to do in all areas ?

McCLOY: I think so. If there was anything that the Commission didn't do that it should have done, I think it was the Commission's responsibility rather than anything that came from the Executive.

Q: You weren't barred- -

McCLOY: We weren't barred from anything. The Commission did have some sensitivity as to how far it should go in terms of public exhibits. Chief Justice Warren particularly had some sensitivity about publication of some of the photographs, of the X-rays, that — looking back on it now, I would say that some of the X-rays that were taken in connection with the autopsy should have been part of the public record. But it was with the recognition of the sensitivity of the family and the requests of the family that caused Mr. Chief Justice to lean over backwards in that connection.

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Later on I was sorry that we had not insisted on the full publication, or the publication at least of the X-rays. There were some colored pictures of the President's dead body that you wouldn't want to have a part of a public record in the archives, but there were some X-rays, that I thought could just as well as not have been -

Q: It might have stilled some of the complaints that arose.

McCLOY: Yes, that arose later. And since that time another panel has looked at those X-rays, by the way, and it confirmed the fundamental conclusions of the commission.

Then I can recall being called down to Washington by Mr. Johnson on various occasions when he sought outside advice. I remember very vividly one time when he tried to induce me to go to Vietnam. That was when Senator Lodge first resigned from his position there. He wanted me to take Senator Lodge's place.

Q: As ambassador to Vietnam.

McCLOY: Yes, to take his job in Vietnam. That was early on. That was quite a long way back.

Q: That was the summer of '64, yes.

McCLOY: I objected to such an appointment. I said I didn't know anything about that part of the world; that I didn't think that it was my dish of tea; that at my age at that time, I felt that it would take two or three years out from my practice after I had spent so many years in government and I wished to return to the practice of the law, I didn't want to break into my practice again. I sought some continuity and I felt I had responsibilities to my firm. So I resisted his importunities in that regard. But I must say that I had a very strong impression of the man's force when he pressed me to take the job.

Q: He tried to exercise the treatment at this time.

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McCLOY: Talk about twisting your arm! He probably has forgotten about this, but I will never forget it. It was not in the big Oval Room, but in that little room at the side there. And he was quite insistent - he's a pretty tall man, and he leaned over me, and he said: "We're organizing for victory there, McCloy, and I want you to go out there and help in the organization." He rang all the changes. He went from appealing to my patriotism and shaming me with my lack of it, or lack of willingness to take on a tough job. And I'll never forget, he told me — to give you an idea of how heavy the pressure was — he said to me: "I want you to go out there, McCloy, because you're the finest or the greatest or something, I forget what the adjective was but the indication was that I was a pretty successful proconsul, having in mind my German experience. And he said — these may not have been his exact words but they were close to it — but "You're the greatest proconsul the Republic has had." I saw myself with a Roman toga with a laurel wreath around my head. I must say, he almost got me at that point. I thought to myself, "I can understand how Mr. Johnson gets people to do things for him, because from tremendous pressure and tremendous flattery, I felt that he had rung all the changes and I came out of there rather limp and feeling a little bit ashamed of myself because I hadn't agreed to do it. But it just seemed to be so contrary to my scheme of life at that time, having spent so much of my active adult life in service in the government through the wars, the World Bank and Germany and so forth. But I got a very definite impression of the President's will, and his strength.

Q: Did he continue to ask outsiders such as yourself in for various crisis periods?

McCLOY: Yes. Bob Lovett and I were down there off and on for quite awhile. He talked to me a couple of times in regard to Vietnam. President Kennedy had also asked me for some advice in regard to Vietnam early on. There's no use going into that at this stage. Having seen the commitment which Mr. Kennedy had made of American troops and the American flag into the Vietnam war, which when I was consulted about it, I was very

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reluctant to approve an American intervention there. But, having made the commitment, then I felt that we ought to do what we could to win the war.

I remember one occasion when there was a question of whether we should bomb lines of communication to break up the infiltration and the movement of the troops from the North into South Vietnam. I spoke in favor of such action. I remember very vividly that Clark Clifford was called upon by the President to carry the brief in favor of bombing in that connection. There have been some other reports and alleged comments that I made at a later meeting on Vietnam when some major decisions were up, but those reports are wrong. I didn't attend that later meeting.

Q: You didn't attend the ones in late '67, early '68?

McCLOY: It appeared in the paper that I was one of the people that appeared there, but in checking up my records I found I was in Washington that day, but I didn't attend the meeting. I forget the date for the moment.

Q: The reporters just assumed that you would be there.

McCLOY: They assumed that I'd be there because I had been in some of the others — a good many of other meetings with the President and the NSC on security matters.

But let me just say this in summary of my impressions of Mr. Johnson — I can't recall at the moment all the occasions that I went down there, or all the issues upon which he called on me — he was always very courteous, but very exacting — much more exacting and penetrating in the questions that he put to you than, let's say, his predecessor had been, although I don't mean to disparage his predecessor's approach to problems. Mr. Johnson always gave me the feeling that he knew a great deal about his subject. He knew, of course, the business of government very well indeed. He had a very good memory. He'd be apt to pick you up and say, "Well, the last time you were down here you said this," and I'd forgotten that I'd said it. But I quickly gained the impression that I should

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not go down there and volunteer any information unless I had done my homework. I was always impressed by the depth of his penetration and his anxiety to get the viewpoints of everybody around the table.

Q: He didn't shut any out?

McCLOY: Not at all. Although he was brusque and blunt in his questions, they were never rude and never gave me any other impression than that he was attempting to get to the bottom of the problem before he arrived at a decision.

He used to consult me rather frequently — I say frequently, maybe two or three times — on German problems.

Q: I was going to ask you about your representation of the United States in the Tripartite Talks.

McCLOY: Yes.

Q: Did he have to sell you on that job?

McCLOY: No. He didn't, because this was a field in which I felt I had some familiarity. I knew the personalities on both the British scene and the German scene. And Europe was more my field than the Far East. When he pointed out what the problems were and told me that he wanted me to conduct that negotiation, I was glad to do that. Throughout that, I reported back to him, and of course frequent cables — it was a rather intensive negotiation. I felt that he understood the problem very well indeed. He gave me not a completely free hand, he lined up where the borders of my authority were, but within that he gave me an entirely free hand. I had to come to him to get final approvals from time to time. He gave me a range within which I could operate, and I was glad to be able to operate well within that range. He was very complimentary in terms of the work that we did in that connection. I got the impression again of a man who was thorough and constantly

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trying to find the right answers to some of these complicated questions — and a man of courage.

Q: What did he tell you in his opinion was the chief goal of those talks? Was it political, or was it financial in the sense of the offset purchases?

McCLOY: It was, of course, a combination of both the political and the financial. He stressed the importance of NATO and the importance of the so-called offset problem, the balance of payments problem that we found ourselves involved with, and the necessity of working out a proper sharing of the burdens. He was highly fair, I thought, vis-a-vis our other two national colleagues in that problem, the Germans and the British. And he was very pleased that we got accepted, what I thought was a significant principle, that the financial burden of having our troops abroad and the balance of payments complications that represented, was indeed a common problem. It wasn't only the problem of the exporting country. That was a fundamental principle that we got adopted by both the British and the Germans. Then when we got down to specifics, the agreement we made was entirely acceptable to him, and I think it was a constructive move.

Q: He paid adequate attention to the domestic political pressures, say, in Germany, do you think'?

McCLOY: Yes. He was aware of them at the same time that he had his ear out with the Treasury and with the people in the Senate — Mansfield and others who were trying to dilute what I thought was the fundamental deterrent really, the most convincing deterrent that we have in this whole international situation — that is, the presence of our troops there. This gave us some options other than that of simply pulling the nuclear trigger to kill a whole lot of civilians. He was deeply aware of the implications of those troops presence there. He gave me very good support even though he was harassed heavily by some of the people on the Hill.

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Q: I was going to ask — was there a lot of division in even the Executive Branch over this problem?

McCLOY: I didn't find much division in the Executive Branch, no. I think they were all very sensitive to the importance of that particular form of deterrent and its convincing character to not only our friends but our potential enemies. He was determined to do what he thought was the right thing in spite of rather heavy congressional pressure, at least from certain quarters.

Q: And from his own party, too.

McCLOY: And from his own party. In this respect I thought that he showed great courage, quite as much as any of his predecessors that I had talked to, and I've talked to most of them -

Q: I was going to say, quite a great number.

McCLOY: A good many of them. Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Truman, Mr. Kennedy. I think that probably sums up certainly my general impressions of Mr. Johnson.

I always was impressed by his thoughtfulness, too. The manner in which he dealt with — well, when he went over to the Adenauer funeral, when he went up on the Rhine hillside where Adenauer had lived and talked to the family.

Q: Were you there ?

McCLOY: Yes. He asked me to come along because he knew that I had had a very close connection with Adenauer and the family. He asked me to accompany him up the hill, and I did. He's very thoughtful and sensitive in that regard.

Q: His style and all didn't repel people when he was in close personal contact like that?

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McCLOY: Certainly not at that time. Maybe the ranch style might have been misunderstood at times but never to the point of offense. It may have been difficult for Mr. Adenauer or Mr. Adenauer's successor to adjust to some Johnson maneuvers but I think to no significant degree. However informal it was all done with a goodwill and with a real desire to be courteous to the people that were involved.

He was very unhappy about the way he thought Dr. Erhard had been treated by Mr. McNamara and Mr. Fowler. They had pounded the table pretty heavily in regard to this offset problem, and when Erhard came over here to ask for some concessions, they were rather blunt about it. Mr. Johnson one time expressed to me his feeling that perhaps they had been a little too rough on Mr. Erhard, particularly those two, and that he perhaps had permitted them to go too far in turning Erhard down. But it was an indication of his awareness of the difficult position of the leader of the state with whom he was in negotiation, was under going.

I think on several occasions after that episode he went out of his way to indicate to Dr. Erhard his personal sympathy for his position.

Q: The press made some comment about bad relations between Mr. Kiesinger and Mr. Johnson when Mr. Kiesinger first took office. Was there any substance to that?

McCLOY: I never sensed that. I was with Mr. Johnson when he talked to Mr. Kiesinger. Mr. Kiesinger, whom I know very well, never indicated to me any such friction. I think that there may have been differences of views. But even in his interchanges with Mr. Kiesinger over the German-French relationship, he was never harsh. He never spoke harshly about General de Gaulle, nor did he ever speak, in my presence, harshly to Kiesinger about his tendency to perhaps overemphasize the Franco-German rapprochement vis-a-vis the obligations to NATO. No, I didn't sense that. I think they probably had some difficulty in understanding each other for awhile.

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I don't know whether this gives you the type of material that you are seeking.

Q: Oh yes. Just a couple of other things. One, you made some speeches in 1968 — one, I recall in Chicago, for example, that at least the press took as being critical of the administration's distraction with Vietnam away from Europe, in which you said that Europe should occupy our first position. Did you feel that the administration was seriously distracted from its basic commitments to Europe by Vietnam?

McCLOY: Yes, I thought that we took Europe a little too much for granted. Maybe it was because of our preoccupation with Asia and Vietnam. I remember using the expression that, "after all, Europe was the Big League." But this wasn't directed certainly solely against Mr. Johnson. I had the feeling that the State Department took the European scene a little too much for granted and that if they had been a little more prescient in terms of what was developing in France as well as in Germany we might have been able to avoid the difficulties that we got into in the abrupt withdrawal of France from NATO. Maybe that's not a sound judgment, but I just felt that that area needed closer attention than it was getting from the Administration. I think I was probably more critical of the Secretary of State in that respect than I was of Mr. Johnson.

Q: There's one other area that's not directly related to Mr. Johnson, but I think it's important and it satisfies my curiosity. Several years ago I think Richard Rovere wrote an article in which he made you the president of the American Establishment, or the Chairman of the Board, or what have you. How true is that there's an establishment in the foreign policy area that is really predominant in the making of American foreign policy?

McCLOY: Let me say first that when anyone speaks of me as the head of the Establishment, I rear up.

Q: I figured you would.

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McCLOY: I “rear”back. Because my concept of the establishment is someone who's to the manor born, who conventionally comes up with, if not a silver spoon in his mouth, at least a pretty well plated spoon. That is the Establishment in terms that it was used in England.

Q: Capital E, yes.

McCLOY: And since I was born far north of the dividing line in Philadelphia — the so-called Chinese wall 'way north of the railroad tracks — and had to work my way through everything — born, in very, very modest circumstances, it is hard for me to accept the establishment as relating to me. I had to fight my way, I thought, through to any form of recognition without any support from below or my family or my environment. So I always feel irritated when they talk about me as the head of the Establishment.

Now, it's true I went to an Eastern college, and I went to the Harvard Law School. But I never thought of myself as being one of those who, so to speak, “belonged” or one of those who had a fore-ordained position. And I know Rovere had his tongue in his cheek — when he dubbed me as “Chairman of the Establishment”.

Q: I know. But there is a group of people — men who for the last thirty years have been extremely important — you, Mr. Acheson, Mr. Harriman — in and out of government; Mr. Lovett you mentioned awhile ago; Arthur Dean, a few like that.

McCLOY: Well, we're on the Eastern Seaboard, I suppose, and we see the play across the Atlantic a little more closely than the Middle West or the Far West, for that matter. But I had no connections whatever with government until the war. Then I was called down there because — I think it was because, I had spent so much time fighting Germans. During World War II was “over there.”

Then, in the period between the wars I was involved in very heavy litigation against the German government, the famous Black Tom Case, and, through that, got to know a good bit of the intrigues and the espionage and the counter-espionage. As a result of winning

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of that case, Mr. Stimson heard about me. And when he was reorganizing the War Department, and particularly the intelligence group, he suddenly called me up and said: "I understand you know more about German espionage than anybody in the country, or almost anybody in the country. I wonder if you would come down and take a look at the War Department." That's how I happened to get into government, as a pure accident. It wasn't because I was recognized as one of a group that knew a lot about international affairs.

Q: How well did that group of people that I mentioned just as examples view Mr. Johnson's presidency, do you think?

McCLOY: How many did?

Q: How will they, people such as yourself and the group that is associated in the Eastern Seaboard with the foreign policy — how will they rank or evaluate Mr. Johnson's presidency?

McCLOY: I don't know that I can speak for them. Take Dean Rusk. Dean Rusk isn't one of that group. He came from the Middle West. He was Secretary of State. Dean Acheson, of course, was very close to Truman and has a very high regard for Truman. I saw him in a number of the councils with Mr. Johnson. I think they respected each other, but I don't think their relationship — Dean Acheson's relationship with Johnson — was ever as close as it had been with Truman. Of course, he was Truman's Secretary of State.

Q: What you're saying is that there's no one position, and that's a good answer.

McCLOY: I think that's right. Bob Lovett, who, again, was with Stimson — Stimson happened to choose him I think because Lovett had been active in Air Force matters. Lovett may be more of a — I don't want to give Lovett the man as the head of the Establishment —

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Q: You're trying to get rid of it.

McCLOY: I'm trying to get rid of it. But, after all, he went to Yale, and all that skull and bones business — which was never part of my experience at all. I know Lovett respected Mr. Johnson, and always responded to any call that he got from him.

Arthur Dean was down there a good bit.

Q: Of course, he was in government.

McCLOY: Yes, he was. But I don't know that I was closely enough involved in any problems that Dean and President Johnson were particularly close together in. But I think that the fact that Johnson, who came from Deep in the Heart of Texas without all this Harvard-Yale-Eastern Seaboard background, the fact that he did call on people that he felt had experience and judgment in international affairs and other affairs indicates something of his catholic approach.

But this idea that there is a little group up here that really direct foreign policy is one of these silly little myths that exists. Today, with the communications across the country and the media-flow back and forth across the country, the concept of the Adams and those that are related to the Adams run the affairs of the country, I think is a fetish rather than a fact.

Q: I'm glad to get it down though because thirty or forty years from now, there are so many people who say there is such a group that to have it denied in a way that's convincing by the alleged chairman. I think its worth getting on this record at least.

Are there any other topics or areas ?

McCLOY: I don't think there's anything at the moment. I didn't really prepare myself for this interview. I'm just giving you my impressions off the top of my head. I can't for the moment

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think of anything else that I feel would be worthwhile trying to record. I am glad, however, that you gave me an opportunity to rebel against the thought that I was to the manor born.

Q: Thank you for giving us so much time in the middle of a busy afternoon, Mr. McCloy.

McCLOY: Not at all.

End of interview