

This is an interview with H. Roemer McPhee in Mr. McPhee's Washington office, October 11, 1977. Present for the interview Mr. McPhee, Dr. Maclyn Burg of the Eisenhower Library staff.

BURG: Okay and the few questions that we have left to check with. Let me try this out on you because I don't think I've asked before. One of the scholars that took a look at the Eisenhower staff wondered whether your similarity, one to another on that staff, promoted loyalty and a team spirit and reduced the range of solutions that you would offer the President.

McPHEE: Is this being recorded, Mac?

BURG: Yes.

McPHEE: That had never, ever occurred to me before, so I tend to think it's just an unfounded idea. I don't know that everybody was so similar. I thought of them as generally rather disparate. They came from all over. I wonder what similarities? I guess people had college educations by and large, but they weren't from any group of schools or—

BURG: He suggested no intellectuals, neither long hair nor short hair, if I quote him directly, which certainly takes care of Karl Harr and Art Minnich and others.

McPHEE: In what way does it take care of them?

BURG: It seems to just wipe them off as intellectuals.

McPHEE: And everybody else.

BURG: Yes.

McPHEE: And what about Hauge, who has a Ph.D. in economics at Harvard and has made his living before he got to the Eisenhower White House by writing economic analyses for Business Week which were highly regarded by economists everywhere? I really think that was a little bit of a quick judgment.

BURG: Comes out of a doctoral dissertation. The only thing I could think of is that he is suggesting because of the similarities, his view of the similarity of the staff, we do not have, "brilliance"-- the sparkling, right off-the-top-of-the-head intuitive solution to any problem. I've been advised by other White House staff members that that might have been a darned good thing. That they thought that the bulk of the work you did really called for hard study, long analysis of rather complex problems, and that somebody who tended to shoot from the hip intellectually might not have been a great asset to you.

McPHEE: Well, that would surely be true I would say in any White House for that matter. But brilliance—and there were a lot of people on that staff that were very, very bright. I mean, people had original ideas. It sounds almost to me like somebody's less-than-objective assessment. It sounds to me almost as though somebody had a possibly pre-determined idea of

what the Eisenhower staff was. I've seen this before; it's a companion to preconceived ideas of what the President was, which to my understanding and based upon my exposure to him reflected an appalling lack of knowledge or appreciation.

But I suppose I could be said to be very biased and prejudiced, and I would concede that I was looking for or would be looking for maybe things to defend and support, affirmative kinds of things. But I really also think as objectively as I can make myself be that those assessments just can't strike me, frankly—if I may use the word—as intellectual, as intelligent. Because I don't think anybody who knew that staff and knew the people that were there would say that it was lacking in intellectual capacity, lacking in brilliance. I mean the bright idea that comes along, which I think is what maybe is meant by that rather than some plodding discharge of one's responsibilities without flashes of insight or brilliance, I don't believe that that staff was devoid of those things. I really don't. I'm not, as you suggested or whoever it was, we weren't running around with, you know, sort of flare guns flashing off ideas every five minutes. I wouldn't say that either. But there were bright people there. There was Malcolm Moos, you know, I don't believe that somebody who's just been in academia is necessarily classified as an intellectual or brilliant, but Mac Moos was a very bright guy who had come out of the academic world and he was there. And there were, give me time to think, and I think there are a number of others that while they might not fit somebody else's idea of what an intellectual or a brilliant person is, I think they might upon inspection bear up as being very, very bright people with considerable, enormous capabilities intellectually, who, given the passage of time and everything else would have their sufficient insights of brilliance.

BURG: Tough to know what he was driving at because if you look at that reduce the range of solutions—

[Interruption]

BURG: It seems that the very nature of the fact that you are a Republican administration certainly reduces the ranges of solutions that you're going to feel that you can make, or offer to any of the problems that you have to deal with. But he said it, and he's one of the few thus far who have done anything on a study of the administration. This one may have come out of here, too, out of that same dissertation. Was the President's exposure to new ideas limited by the staff? Obviously from your previous response you would say no.

McPHEE: No, not at all. Not within my experience and mine would be less than many others who saw more of him than I did, but just—

BURG: Is it fair to take the OCB, for example, the coordination board, the various planning boards, which from the way they've been described to me by Harr and others seem to be a perfect vehicle for funneling in from all over those pieces of knowledge that needed to be presented to the President. Bringing them in to one centralized location, preparing them, presenting them to him. It would seem to me that surely this was a device.

McPHEE: Yes, I don't see it that way. Going back to the prior questions, too, remember Andrew Jackson Goodpaster. Andy Goodpaster with Ph.D. 's, considered one of the fine scholars, finest scholars, I guess, West Point's ever produced, now at the head of the Academy. He was our staff secretary. He was chosen by the President because of this brilliant record, if I can use that phrase again here, and Andy's another example. Andy worked with the President on international security affairs and highly classified intelligence matters. The President handpicked him for that job because of his extraordinary qualifications.

BURG: And Gordon Gray, as we think about it, had more than a slight acquaintanceship with the academic side, too.

McPHEE: That's right. But coming to this one, there was definitely a procedure, a system of plans, a means of controlling who saw the President, and for what purpose, and for how long. But this is indispensable, you can't have a staff that just sort of is falling all over itself to get in and out at different times. In other words, the President's schedule has to be organized and managed well. But if there was a proper reason for somebody to see the President on that staff, he saw the President.

And in my day, those last couple of years, I've talked about when I sort of got to be a senior-level, second tier person on the staff, my access to the President was immediate, whenever I needed to see him about something I was working on. If I wasn't queried or checked as to what I might be going to say to him—I had a job to do and I had to go into see him and I went in to see him and I said what I had to say. And if there was a new idea in there, which there was from time to time, it went to him and he would mull that around, puzzle with it and come out. I can think of a number of instances where that kind of a thing happened; I think some that we've talked about. I would say that's not right. The only thing that could bear on that is what I've said. If there was no legitimate reason—there has to be control at the flow. Time has to be used in the most efficient way.

I remember once I went in to see him and there had been a meeting—this is maybe a very good example going the other way, showing that that's just not accurate—and we'd had a meeting with the President about a particular matter. I had a different view from the four other people on the staff who were in there seeing it with me, all five of us and our time ran out. There was enough talk about the affirmative side of this, I happened to be, I guess, the negative side, or whatever it was, but on the way out I simply said, "I had no opportunity to lay before the President this other point of view." And the people I was with, Gerry Morgan was the senior, said, "Absolutely," and as we walked out of the President's office a new time was scheduled for a renewal of that meeting for the other side of this whole thing to be laid before him by me. And it was done within the next day or two and it was all there, and then he had everything he needed to have to wrestle that around in his head and make a decision and he did. He didn't come out the way I felt would be warranted under the circumstances, but he heard it all for another thirty minutes and, then went on from there. I thought that the staff function had been discharged. He had heard whatever the staff had to say that was pertinent in the two meetings, and from then on it was for him to decide and he could ask little questions here, there, whatever, which helped him further in his deliberations about the matter and then he made a decision and that was it.

McPhee, Interview #4, October 11, 1977

BURG: And the unpopular view was as welcomingly received?

MCPHEE: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

BURG: So you don't recollect anyone on the staff saying—

McPHEE: Oh, no, and he understood that, it wasn't said in his presence, but he understood before we got in there for the second go-round that this was simply for the other side to be stated by me. And that was fine, it was what he wanted.

BURG: Nobody on the staff is standing around saying, "Well, criminy, he doesn't want to listen to me because he knows I'm going to toss cold water on a favorite project."

McPHEE: I never saw anything like that.

BURG: It would seem incongruous by comparison with his military service during the Second World War.

McPHEE: Yes, I think that puts a good finger on it, Mac, and this is why he had a staff secretary and a staff in the way he had a staff, because he had seen the value of that in terms of helping him in what he had to do in his various military responsibilities, and he wanted something approximating that for his responsibilities as President. I don't know what the military staff system is per se, —and I somewhere have the impression that this was not by any means a one for one of the military staff setup—but it was adapted and it had elements of and it was tailored to fit this new context he was operating in as President.

But he wanted a staff system and he had it because it was going to help him. And I think it would be anomalous to suggest that he had a staff system and then either he didn't use it or it didn't function as he intended it to do. I don't think that was possible.

BURG: Okay. Do you recollect anything that was likely to promote a clash on the staff? Or did disagreements restrict themselves to ever-changing personnel? That is, you and I might be on the same side of the issue today, but tomorrow's issue, a different issue, you line up with Ed McCabe, I line up with Gerry Morgan. Three days after that, the alignments shift again. Do I make my point clear? Do clashes tend to show up that way or are there competing groups that always clash within that staff? Or disagree?

McPHEE: No, I never saw the latter. I go back to some of the things I'm sure I've said to you in these interviews and that is it was a remarkable experience. It's one I've never had before or since in terms of the compatibility of that staff. They did have differences of views and they would come up on different sides, but never as cliques or clacks or whatever. I don't have any recollection of any group that was a constant negative in a consistent way or something like that. I don't have any--

BURG: The reason I asked that is because my service on a faculty, I recall one of the senior members saying to me, "I never worry as long as our contentions vary their personnel.

What I do worry about is any period of time, a month or so, when I find the same people lined up against the same people. "Then," he said, "I feel we're beginning to lose our effectiveness and we're in trouble as a faculty."

McPHEE: Well, I suppose I'm not the best judge of this because I had a less than total view. I didn't see as much particularly in the first few years I was there. In '58, '59, or '60 I saw a great deal more. But I never saw anything like that. I told you about Jack Martin leaving and the White House mess, the celebration lunch, just farewell, to Jack Martin who was going off to become a judge. This was in '58 when he spoke—I told you.

BURG: I think you did.

McPHEE: Well, he had been with Robert Taft as his number one person politically and substantively for who knows how many years. And when Senator Taft died the White House brought him to the White House. This was early in the Eisenhower administration, before I got there. I think this happened in the summer of '53, and I didn't come there for a year, a year later.

But Jack Martin who had been in politics and in government all his adult life, practically, said in his farewell statement in that mess, that it was a most remarkable experience for him because this staff, unlike anything he'd ever been exposed to before, was a team that sort of pulled together despite their differences and that he'd never seen any palace guard, intrigue, no back biting, no jealousies, no trying to crawl over somebody's back to gain some advantage. And it was a marvelous statement because coming from me it didn't mean much I would have said, but having this man say it who had had this enormous experience and saying he'd never had anything like that as an experience before, which I thought remarkable.

BURG: Indeed it was.

McPHEE: And if you want, somebody I suppose could say from that that the staff was a bland, passionless set of automatons with no brilliance, no intelligence, no intellect. It doesn't follow.

BURG: And no wide range of solutions.

McPHEE: It doesn't follow. Just because they worked well together and liked each other-- basically liked each other--doesn't mean that they weren't competent.

BURG: Okay.

[Interruption]

BURG: You were saying that in the fall of '60, one of the worries that you had was the information compiled by USIA: that material ought to be secure, or you were concerned about its security.

McPHEE : Well, what happened was that some of it began to appear in the New York Times. It was leaked by people who were not interested in seeing the Republicans win, and they gave this out and Kennedy did use it. He'd been talking about the missile gap and he'd been talking about the loss of prestige abroad, and all of these things were aided and abetted by the adverse findings. I think what I really remember is polls that were taken abroad, I thought by USIA-- whether it was the foreign intelligence or foreign, what's that thing, foreign--

BURG: Foreign activities information.

McPHEE: Yes, foreign information emphasis--well, I don't remember, but anyway what my recollection is USIA had polls which I thought they'd commissioned, but maybe somebody else did and they had them. These would show a selected poll. What I was told, which seemed plausible enough, was that a selected poll could be adverse. But a week later if something else happened, another poll could show a very favorable reaction. And I guess this is generally so-- I'm not enough of a student of it to know, but you do see in these Presidential popularity polls that Gallop and Harris and Yankovitch and these others take that they bounce up and down according to what's happened in the last ten days. But anyway nobody was interested in giving a perspective on these polls, they were just being leaked selectively and the bad ones, or whatever else—it may have been more than polls—and they'd find their way into the *New York Times*. And I remember talking to George Allen who was the head of USIA about that, and he was as frustrated as he could be because he knew where they were coming from, his agency, but he had no idea who was doing it and how would you ever know? Of course, this goes on in this town all the time. Everything is leaked or leakable.

I think I may have told you about some innocuous memorandum that Hauge sent to the President and two other people, three other people; quotes from it found its way into Jack Anderson's column. Not because there was anything of such significance in there, I always thought, but rather because it was just interesting from their standpoint to demonstrate that they had something like this and could get it. Nobody could ever figure out how that ever got to them because it was two or three people, it was on an economic point. But you know a lot of people handled it and maybe it blew out the window. Who will ever know?

BURG: Somebody types it—

McPHEE: Right. But, I never would have doubted the security in our office. I was then with Hauge in there; I never would have doubted that. I don't know why these figures—I just don't know.

BURG: And if this other thing does relate to USIA as you now think, there wouldn't be a heck of a lot, in fact absolutely nothing, could be done about it. All you could do would be to protest the situation, deplore it. That'd be it. George Allen couldn't do anything.

McPHEE: No, unless he found the man who was leaking it, but that's highly unlikely because they don't broadcast the fact that they're giving out material labeled "Secret" or "Top Secret." Whether it's correctly or incorrectly labeled, it nevertheless bears the label, and it's still

being given out, and the *New York Times* printed it. Newspapers do this. They don't necessarily honor government classification labels, so I think they'd reach their own judgments as to whether this is going to damage the United States. I don't think they'd do anything that was seriously dangerous to the country, but the fact that some poll shows that we're doing poorly in Bulgaria, maybe labeled "Secret", maybe improperly so; I don't think they'd have a problem printing something like that because they wouldn't really think it was momentous, and it probably isn't.

BURG: Yes. There was one other thing that also connects with Hampton. Do you now recall whether anyone on the staff tended to override the appointments routing that he had set up? He seemed to feel that the appointment approaches that he had set up were being overridden.

McPHEE: You mean the path by which they were processed?

BURG: Evidently so.

McPHEE: Is this before the Governor, Governor Adams, left?

BURG: My impression is after. That's only an impression.

McPHEE: Well, he worked very closely with the Governor on appointments. I mean the Governor had a role in that and kept it apparently. Exactly what happened when the Governor? Well, I know what happened. I know what happened. Dave Kendall really took that responsibility. So he came in replacing Gerry Morgan who became the Deputy Assistant to the President, Jerry Persons became the Assistant to the President, brought Gerry, with the President's concurrence, into the position of Deputy Assistant, left the job of counsel vacant and Dave Kendall was selected to be the Counsel to the President.

Dave was asked not only to be Counsel to the President, but also to worry about the President's appointments as the senior staff person on those. He would go to General Persons or Gerry Morgan if he needed to, but I think General Persons was not relishing the idea of, or not thinking maybe he was the best person either to worry about something that had a lot of political overtones to it. And Dave Kendall had been a political person, been a national committeeman from Michigan and, of course, Governor Adams had been, and maybe the thought was that the substance and the political judgments ought to be combined as they had been in Adams. So anyway Kendall was asked to do it and he did. That was why my job became different, with that changeover, as I have always understood it and my title changed. I went from Assistant to the President, Assistant Special Counsel to the President to Associate Special Counsel to the President and that was intended to signify that I was bearing a larger responsibility in the counsel's office. This thing you have on tape.

BURG: Maybe we do.

McPHEE: And I had some areas that were really almost, and were in fact, mine to work on independently of anybody else, subject always to my responsibility to check with anybody else that I thought I ought to check with, whether it be Dave Kendall, General Persons, Gerry Morgan, or whomever. And Dave got that job and it was a terrible job. Took an enormous

amount of his time. I know I've talked about this. And it was an appropriate thing to divide up the responsibilities of the counsel's office a little bit differently. It always seemed to me it was very appropriate.

Now, coming back to your question as to whether anything interfered with the flow of appointment processing from Hampton. I always had a role in it in those days. I was the first one to read and evaluate the background investigations that were done by the FBI usually, almost invariably, on Presidential appointees of major rank. Not everybody that was asked to go on a delegation to Europe representing the President, for example, would get a full-field FBI background investigation. But I read those and had to evaluate them in the first instance and so I had that input. But Bob bore the responsibility for administration, processing, all of this, and he worked with Dave Kendall. Thereafter, it went to the President. Now I'm sure as in Adams' time, anybody like a Gerry Morgan or a General Persons had an input; it would be worked into the process, and the other way, too. Dave Kendall would go to them if he had questions that arose in connection with what he and Bob were working on for some spot and talked to them about it. But I don't know what Bob means—

BURG: Is it conceivable that Bob—he strikes me as being a very precise man.

MCPHEE: He is.

BURG: A man of very strict regimen, routines. Is it possible that any of these alternate systems bothered him?

McPHEE: No, I don't think so. I think Bob is probably thinking of something that I may have known of at some time and just can't recall now where something got in the way of his normal—and maybe it wasn't always the same person. You know, somebody terrible interested in seeing "Joe" appointed or wants to know who's going into this job because it's a department that he works with or something like that. He can sort of interest himself in it, but I think I'm flying too blind.

BURG: So there's no case that comes to your mind that sticks out.

McPHEE: No, but if Bob Hampton mentioned something I'd probably remember, but I just don't. I just can't bring anything to mind on my own at the moment.

BURG: Okay. On transition, I believe that you and I discussed transition insofar as it affected you, the transition out into the Kennedy administration. It seems to me my recollection is that you didn't have a great deal to do in the transition period, that it was carried on fairly easily. You perhaps had a meeting or two.

McPHEE: Well, I remember [Theodore C.] Sorensen came in once. He was going to be the new counsel to the President and talked with us a little bit. He was difficult, sort of a difficult person I gather anyway, and I don't think—. You know, he was the conquering party. It wasn't altogether a very satisfactory time, but I guess he was—I only think he came in once. He wasn't really terribly interested in what we had to say about the—



BURG: You explained pretty much what you were doing and—

McPHEE: Yes, but I'm not sure he really ended up being a counsel to the President in the way we were. He wrote an awful lot of speeches. I don't know what else he did. I really can't say. I gather that transitions are difficult times anyway and this was not a case of a defeated President. This was a case of just a President whose party had been defeated. He was going out under no cloud.

BURG: Yes, right. Now you've talked with me about the Gettysburg period, I mean the fact that you were up there a number of times and had various meetings with the President, kept him informed of things. Let me refresh my memory. Did you then, on transition, come to this law firm? Or were there interim steps before you came here?

McPHEE: I came directly to this law firm.

BURG: And have been here since then.

McPHEE: I've been here since.

BURG: Okay, that takes care of what I needed to know from you. And, by the way, thanks so much for all the time you've given me.

McPHEE: It's a pleasure.