ARRB Telephonic Interview with Robert S. McNamara, February 23, 1996
(Text reviewed and approved by Robert S. McNamara)

Interviewer: T. Jeremy Gunn; notes taken by Timothy A. Wray

[NOTE: Except for passages shown in italics, this is not a verbatim transcript. Rather, it is a reconstruction based on extensive notes taken during the interview.]

Q: What instructions did you give to the military on the day of President Kennedy's assassination?

A: I'm not really sure. I first received the information in the conference room adjacent to my office in the Pentagon. We were preparing for a DOD budget meeting with the President scheduled to take place at Hyannis over Thanksgiving. Mac Bundy was there, as well as the budget director and a senior military officer (though not necessarily the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs -- probably one of his senior assistants). My secretary interrupted and had me come out to take a call from Bobby Kennedy. Bobby told me that the President had been shot, though at that time he did not yet know that he had been killed. I returned to the meeting, and then a short time later Bobby called back to tell me the President was dead. He asked me to go with him out to Andrews Air Force Base in the evening to meet Air Force One and receive the body. (I said yes, and rode out there with him; Maxwell Taylor may also have gone with us.) When I was done talking on the phone to Bobby I went back into the meeting and informed them what had happened and the meeting broke up.

I think I called the Chairman, JCS and discussed with him what to do. I think we did do something about increasing our alert status, but this is just a hypothesis. I don't really recall.

Q: Do you recall how long the alert was in effect?

A: No. *At the time I thought we had to take account of the fact this might be an action taken by or supported by the Soviet Union.* But that seemed highly unlikely to me. The Chairman, JCS and the senior military followed this and I left it to them. I never really thought the Soviet Union was involved.

Q: Do you recall ever discussing with Lyndon Johnson the possibility that the Soviet Union might take advantage of the assassination?

A: I have no recollection of that. I probably did discuss that with President Johnson; that certainly seems reasonable. I didn't really think the Soviet Union was involved, and even if they were I thought they wouldn't try anything right away but possibly something more longer range. I don't recall any immediate conversations with Johnson in those days. There was a meeting with LBJ concerning Vietnam -- I think there's a photo of it in my book -- before Johnson moved into the Oval

Office. I don't recall specifically discussing the assassination with him but probably did so over several days.

Q: Let me ask you about President Johnson's decision to name Earl Warren to head the Warren Commission. In his memoirs, Warren says that LBJ persuaded him to serve as chairman of the commission by telling Warren that you'd told Johnson that 40 million people might die in a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union unless the assassination were cleared up.

A: I did not tell "Johnson 40 million might die unless the assassination were cleared up." I might have said to Johnson on an earlier occasion that if a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union were to occur 40 million people might die. This was 1963. I don't recall the number of strategic nuclear warheads we thought the Soviets had at that time, but we'd thought they had 500 during the Cuban Missile Crisis the previous year (and we later learned that the number was really much lower). I'm sure I would have said something like possibly the loss of 40 million in case of a Soviet first strike. *I suspect I had talked to Johnson that way, not necessarily when he was President but possibly earlier while he was still Vice President. I was concerned about a nuclear war, and I also talked to JFK about this too. I thought that the chance of a first strike attack was close to zero, and didn't really worry too much about it in the days right after the assassination.* However, the quote you gave does sound like Lyndon Johnson. [Laughing] That's exactly the way he would approach Warren. I probably told him 40 million at some time, but probably not in the interval immediately after the assassination.

Q: Was President Johnson concerned about a possible threat to the U.S. when he was setting up the Warren Commission?

A: Johnson was much more concerned about the domestic implications than any foreign threat -- the domestic political implications. He was seeing this in political terms. I don't mean that in LBJ's own personal sense, but rather the attitude of the country and the need to reassure it and so forth. He did talk to me about the appointment of some of the Warren Commission members. I specifically recall talking with him about Gerald Ford. We also discussed Warren. We had lived close to the Warrens in California, and although I did not know him that well I was fond of him. *I'm almost certain LBJ talked to me about establishing the Commission, and about Warren and Jerry Ford.*

Q: Did President Johnson ever express any doubts about the Warren Commission then or later?

A: I don't remember that. Lyndon Johnson was very shrewd. He may have had doubts -- but I don't recall anything specifically.

Q: Johnson has been quoted as saying about the Kennedys that "we were running a goddamn Murder Incorporated down there in the Caribbean. Kennedy tried to kill Castro, but Castro got him first" --

or something like that.

A: When did he say that?

Q: I recall about 1966, but I'm not sure.

A: In 1966, I don't think he knew about U.S. attempts to assassinate Castro. *I don't think I knew in 1966 that we had supported assassination attempts against Castro. You may find that hard to believe. But I found it hard to believe that we had carried out assassination attempts against Castro in three administrations: Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson.* I remember at the time of the Church Committee hearings I didn't think the CIA was a rogue elephant, so all that was hard to believe.

At that time we had the 303 Committee, and it reviewed every major covert operation and informed the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense of any major action. *I know that while I was there I was never informed of any assassination attempts against Castro.* I can't believe that something like this went to the President without anyone telling me. And I don't believe that either Kennedy or Johnson would have approved of this in any event. Now, it's hard to reconcile this with the findings of the Church Committee -- that this did happen. And I don't think McCone would have approved, or done something like this on his own. The CIA may have gone ahead without McCone or presidential approval. But I found all this hard to reconcile with my own knowledge and experience.

In 1992 I raised these contradictions with a former senior CIA official. He said they <u>did</u> try to kill Castro, and implied it was done in accordance with the wishes of the Presidents. The CIA probably didn't tell McCone. I think it may have been a case of someone hearing the President or Bobby Kennedy say "We've got to get rid of that guy." LBJ talked like that, but I don't think he knew what was going on.

Let me offer you a personal insight. I met Castro -- I spent three days with him in Havana in January, 1992. [I was not a member of the MONGOOSE Committee, although I was aware of the program. So far as I know it did not include assassinations.] And Castro knew about the assassination attempts. I had long one-on-one conversations with him over three days, including one that went until 4 o' clock in the morning. *I came away with a strong impression that Castro had nothing to do with the assassination of President Kennedy.*

Q: On the day of the assassination, do you recall requesting any information from the military about Lee Harvey Oswald?

A: No. No recollection.

Q: While at Bethesda the night of the autopsy, do you recall talking to Admiral Burkley?

A: Who is Admiral Burkley? I don't recall who that was.

Q: Admiral Burkley was President Kennedy's personal physician.

A: I have no recollection of speaking to him.

Q: Do you recall encouraging anyone to speed up or limit the autopsy ?

A: No. No recollection of that. I went out there [to Bethesda] because Jackie asked Bobby to ask if I'd come out. Jackie was still wearing the bloodstained suit and was extremely traumatized. I felt we should get her out, and I may even have said we should get her back to the White House. But she said she wouldn't leave without the body. So I may have said something like, "Come on, let's get it done." But my real concern was for Jackie and her welfare. We wound up staying out there until something like 4:30 the next morning. I mostly remember talking to her and Bobby.

Q: Do you recall making any phone calls to Admiral Burkley?

A: No recollection of doing that. And it's very unlikely I would have done that.

Q: Admiral Burkley later said he went back and forth between the autopsy and the 17th floor. . .

A: I have no recollection of talking to him. *Now, if he says that I don't doubt it a bit. It's just that I can't recall.* My main concern was for Jackie and how long the autopsy would take.

Q: Last week we took a deposition from Dr. James Humes, who was in charge of conducting the autopsy. He said that Admiral Burkley told him that Robert Kennedy had told him [Burkley] that the family wanted to bury JFK's brain with the rest of his body. Do you remember anything about that?

A: No recollection at all. When I was out at Bethesda, there were other associates of JFK from Boston also present. I particularly remember that Kenny O' Donnell and some of the others wanted him buried in Boston, but I said he had to be buried in Arlington. But it was inconceivable that we had any discussion about whether to do this with or without his brain.

Q: Humes raised the issue of burying the brain with the body. . .
A: Absolutely no memory of it. I was involved in the discussion of Boston versus Arlington. In fact early the next day I went to Arlington to find an appropriate place to bury the President; later I went out with Jackie to check the site. So I was involved in the burial plans, but I don't remember any discussion of the President's brain.

Q: President Kennedy was reinterred in 1967. . .

A: Yes. I was there. It happened at night.

Q: There is speculation on the part of some that a small box that appears in some photographs of the reinterment might have contained the President's brain.

A: I have absolutely no knowledge of that. I'm certain I'd recall if someone had said, "There's that box with the President's brain in it." But nobody said anything like that. And I don't recall any small box.

Q: Do you know someone named Dr. Robert Livingston?

A: I know him well. In fact, I talked to him yesterday.

Q: Have you ever discussed the autopsy with Dr. Livingston?

A: He has discussed it with me. I believe he's a neuro-physiologist. I think he's reliable, reputable, and a good scientist. *However, I think his views about the assassination require careful cross-examination. I think his conclusions -- well, they just lack sufficient credibility for me to accept.*

Q: Did Livingston ever tell you about a conversation he had with Dr. Humes before the beginning of the autopsy?

A: He has told me about his conversations with Dr. Humes. He's a reputable scientist and reliable. But I've often found his speculations ill-founded. I've known Livingston for 40 years, but I have no recollections of that conversation. Livingston first told me about it about five years ago, and I'm almost certain we never had any discussion about it previously.

Q: Lee Harvey Oswald served in the Marines during the 1950's. After his discharge, he traveled to the Soviet Union where he defected, renounced his U.S. citizenship, and then married a Russian woman who was closely related to an intelligence official. He then returned to the United States and engaged in pro-Castro activities. Given his previous service in the U.S. military, were any steps taken by the Pentagon to investigate Lee Harvey Oswald after the assassination?
A: No. And I don't recall that I knew about all that [Oswald's record] then. I don't recall any actions we may have taken.

Q: Any taskings to the NSA [National Security Agency]?

A: No recollection. I'm almost sure they weren't tasked.

Q: Who in the Pentagon would do an investigation of Lee Harvey Oswald?

A: Well, me if nobody else. In that case I might have called in the Director of the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency], or talked to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs about contacting the Director of the DIA. Or else CIA or NSA. But the probable course would have been to go through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But I'm almost certain I didn't. I don't say that for sure, but I have no recollection of doing anything.

Q: Any investigations by ONI or the Navy?

A: No, no recollection. Some of that information about Lee Harvey Oswald must have come from some investigation they did after the event, but whatever it was I don't recall.

Q: Did you ever discuss the assassination with Robert Kennedy?

A: No. I did go out to Andrews with Bobby. And he asked me to go up the ramp and into the plane with him but I refused. I told him it was only appropriate for him to do that. But I don't recall, then or ever, discussing the assassination with him.

Q: Do you recall Robert Kennedy ever asking John McCone whether there was any CIA connection to the assassination?

A: I never heard about that. I don't say it didn't happen, but I either don't recall or didn't hear it. I don't think Bobby Kennedy thought the CIA was connected to the assassination. If he said something like that, I think he was just running down every possible lead. Bobby would have told me if he thought the CIA was involved.

Q: I'd like to ask about Robert Kennedy's involvement in actions against Castro. . .

A: Bobby Kennedy was <u>deeply</u> involved in MONGOOSE.

Q: What was Robert Kennedy doing with respect to Cuba policy in 1963?

A: I have no recollection. He may have been doing something then (other than MONGOOSE) but I don't recall.

Q: Do you know anything about Robert Kennedy investigating a possible Cuban or Mafia role in the assassination?

A: Bobby Kennedy thought the investigation should follow every lead. But I never heard those speculations [about Cuba/Mafia involvement]. I don't know about Bobby, but I doubt it. Still, Bobby might have tried to follow up on that lead without believing it likely.

Q: Let me ask you a similar question about Daniel Patrick Moynihan and a possible Chicago Mafia connection. . .

A: I don't remember anything about that. Pat Moynihan is still alive so you could ask him. If I had heard about an investigation in Chicago, I'm certain I would remember it as I had heard a rumor about a threat to me from Chicago. It would have been very much like Bobby to conduct an investigation, but I have no personal knowledge about whether he did it or not.

Q: In 1962 President Kennedy made a famous speech to the 2506th Cuban Brigade in which he told them their flag should be returned to a free Havana. What do you think were President Kennedy's thoughts at that time about what we should do about Cuba?

A: I know what they were <u>not</u>. His thoughts were <u>not</u> about using U.S. military force against Cuba. There were some contingency plans, but I know Kennedy was not thinking about initiating military action against Cuba prior to the time the missiles were moved in. *To the best of my knowledge, President Kennedy had no intention of removing Castro by military force.*

Q: In 1963, it seemed like we had a two-track policy toward Cuba. On one hand we were carrying out some hit-and-run actions (almost a scaled-down MONGOOSE), but at the same time we also had a secret peace initiative involving William Atwood. . .

A: Yes. In fact, we had someone in contact in Cuba with Castro when JFK was assassinated. . .

Q: Right, Jean Daniel.

A: I think I was aware of that at the time.

Q: Which was the real approach?

A: Both were real. We wanted to protect ourselves against the Soviet Union, but we also wanted to integrate Cuba into the hemisphere.

Q: Did U.S. policy toward Cuba change after the assassination?

A: No.

Q: I'd like to ask you about President Kennedy's policy toward Vietnam. And here I'm not trying to have you speculate about what might have happened had he lived, but rather just what the policy was and what were his immediate intentions. Do you think President Kennedy was clear in his own mind what his goals toward Vietnam were in 1963?

A: Dean [Rusk], Mac [Bundy], Max [Taylor] and I thought there was a clear risk to the security of the West in Vietnam. In essence, we accepted Eisenhower's "Domino Theory." We thought the loss of Vietnam would strengthen the Soviet and Chinese position in the world, and eventually lead to communist control of all of Southeast Asia with very severe consequences to our strategic interests in that region. Three points: (1) I think JFK shared that feeling. (2) But JFK also thought the war in South Vietnam could only be won by the Vietnamese themselves -- we could not win it for them. (3) In a sense these are contradictory views. How he would have acted if he had lived is hard to predict. In my book, I say I believe he would have withdrawn. I say that even though some believe he would have been compelled to take action by fear of communist hegemony -- it is true he didn't want to seem soft on communism.

On October 2, 1963, we held a meeting at which we decided to withdraw our 16,000 advisors by the end of 1965, and to get the first 1,000 out by the end of 1963. There was controversy at that meeting, and I suggested to the President that we make a public announcement about the withdrawals at the end of the meeting. This showed our thinking at that time.

Q: I'd like to ask about NSAM 273, and whether apparent changes between the first draft done by McGeorge Bundy before the assassination and the final product, which came out after the assassination, reflect a change in our policy toward Vietnam?

A: The clearest statement of U.S. policy on Vietnam at the time of President Kennedy's death is the statement on October 2. I don't recall any contradiction between that and the NSAM draft. What did the NSAM draft say?

Q: It would appear the Bundy draft, written before the assassination, was changed in ways that made more clear the U.S. support for the government of the Republic of Vietnam and less clear the intention to withdraw U.S. troops.

A: I'm uncertain about that. What did I put in writing? Did I write any memos about a change? If there truly was a change, I think I'd have put something in writing to the President.

I don't think there was any significant change in policy after October 2 -- when I'd had a long,

private discussion in the Oval Office with the President about our Vietnam policy, then a Cabinet meeting, and then the public announcement. That October 2 announcement was John F. Kennedy's Vietnam policy.

If the meeting in Hawaii on November 20 had prompted me to think our Vietnam policy should be changed, I wouldn't have relied on Mac Bundy to do that alone. I would have written a memo to the President. But I just don't think the President's views changed after October 2. Now, at the time of the coup [in South Vietnam] President Kennedy was *absolutely shaken.* Still, I don't think any meeting was held with the President after the coup that would have changed our policy after November 2.

Q: Was there a different policy thrust by LBJ?

A: You mean did Lyndon Johnson change the NSAM or Vietnam policy between 22 November and 25 November? No. I'm almost sure of that. Would LBJ even have gone over that NSAM in detail during those days? Highly unlikely. I don't think that happened. I would have known if it had. In our meeting on November 24, I don't recall any deep discussion on Vietnam. The President's instructions were simple: "Win." I'm sure I'd remember if policy changes had been discussed. There would not have been a change in policy without my knowledge. Bundy probably wrote a memo of the November 24 meeting. But remember, LBJ didn't know much about Vietnam policy as he was mostly on the fringes of that. He didn't want to lose [in Vietnam], but Kennedy didn't want to lose either. And Johnson certainly didn't want to do less than Kennedy. But his "win" statement wasn't any big order, just a remark that LBJ thought represented a continuation of Kennedy's own policy. Johnson thought he was just continuing Kennedy's policy on Vietnam. He did the same thing with civil rights.