

**ORAL HISTORY OF
HARRY C. MCPHERSON, JR. - EIGHTH INTERVIEW
MARCH 4, 2003**

It is day eight, March 4, 2003.

Mr. McPherson: A partner asked me this morning, "What happened 70 years ago today?"

Mr. Vanderstar: Seventy. So that would be 1933.

Mr. McPherson: March 4.

Mr. Vanderstar: March 4, 1933. Well, I was about six months and 2 weeks short of being born so I don't have a memory of it, but, oh, FDR was inaugurated.

Mr. McPherson: Right. "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself."

Mr. Vanderstar: Yes. So it was still in March then. When did it get moved back to January, during his term?

Mr. McPherson: Yes.

Mr. Vanderstar: Yes, I think so. It was about time to fix that one. (laughter)
Lincoln in '61 was the most excruciating, I think, but maybe not.

Okay, that's a good question. On with the interview. We got into the State Department work, executive branch work, I should say. But I wanted to take this opportunity to look back on the legislative work and ask you about some very interesting notions you put forward in your book, *A Political Education*. At one point on page 160 you refer to Johnson and other congressional leaders as not being the kind who want to strike bold figures in the morning downtown and return to the Hill and its politics of adjustment in the afternoon.

Mr. McPherson: That had specifically to do with their reluctance to become part

of something called the Democratic Advisory Council, which was to be a kind of platform committee between conventions. It was supposed to be an instrument for expressing political views by senior Democrats—governors and people like Eleanor Roosevelt and failed presidential candidates like Adlai Stevenson. Johnson and Rayburn were asked to be parts of it. They said, “No, thanks,” because they didn’t want to come down and meet with Mrs. Roosevelt and others and be asked to take positions harshly criticizing some of their friends on the Hill with whom they had to work, and so they begged off,

Mr. Vanderstar: But they didn’t dispute the value of having a platform for example?

Mr. McPherson: I guess they didn’t, though the idea of having fixed expressed views on every subject on earth, which is what a platform amounts to, was rather foreign to their normal method of operation in the Congress.

Mr. Vanderstar: Well, Johnson was not lacking in notions about which way the country ought to be going and so on, especially after eight years of Republican administration. That’s one point. Secondly, surely a person like Johnson would want to be involved in the formation of the Democratic platform, however useless he thought the end product would be.

Mr. McPherson: Without a doubt.

Mr. Vanderstar: So, that’s kind of tough one to grapple with.

Mr. McPherson: Well, certainly on civil rights Johnson decided that there had to be legislation after 80 years of silence, and there needed to be action on a number of other fronts. There was a huge recession in 1958. A lot of people out of work, about twelve-and-a-half percent unemployment. The Democratic response, the one that Johnson helped to formulate and drive daily, was to spend our way out of it, to have large construction programs and to accelerate

highway spending and infrastructure spending of all kinds. Within the Democratic party, there were a few people who had already abandoned that method of going after a recession and had gone for tax cuts. Paul Douglas, for example, of Illinois, thought tax cuts for working people was the way to go. Of course, the Eisenhower administration didn't want to do either of them because it meant going deeper into debt, and they fought both and lost a lot of seats as a result because they were pictured as a "Do Nothing" party.

Mr. Vanderstar: Was Johnson heavily involved in the formation of the Democratic platform at the convention in 1960?

Mr. McPherson: I don't know the answer to that. He doubtless had agents, people who were close to him serving as members of the Platform Committee, but I don't know if he really targeted that.

Mr. Vanderstar: Okay.

The other point that I was drawn to in your book was pages 165, where you talked about plays you directed at St. Mark's, and 167, where you talked about lecturing the church people. In all of this there is the recognition that man is flawed and has no right to get up on a high horse and act as if everyone else is flawed but the speaker is not. So how did that work into the dialogue. Would you just talk about that a little?

Mr. McPherson: I will. It's a subject of enormous interest to me as it is to anybody who's looked at politicians and thought about them as they make decisions. The last 20 years, with *Roe v. Wade* and other moral issues that have dominated politics, have certainly taught us that these questions persist, these questions of doing the right thing in a political context. What struck me watching politicians is that it seemed to me that many of them who professed to see a clear moral rightness, particularly those who professed to see issues in the

light of the Bible or some other formal religious text, were very frequently irrelevant to the decisions being made by people who decided on other grounds, at least consciously decided on other grounds.

For example, loyalty is enormously important to politicians, highly valued. Tony Blair today is at great risk to his own political standing in Britain because he's been loyal to the policies that he and George Bush have formed over Iraq, and he has not shimmied. That will be of enormous value to him if this succeeds. If it doesn't, he will suffer very badly. But just the fact that, not so much that he was right, but that he was so loyal and unbending when he was under terrific pressure, that would be of great significance to him in his standing even with, I suspect, many British people who don't agree with him on Iraq.

In the times that I was writing about, civil rights was probably the sharpest edged moral issue within the political context. And yet I tried to say in the book that there were aspects of Black-White relations that couldn't be reduced to a particular bill and amendment and how one voted on those. I've talked about my mother-in-law down in Georgia, a wonderfully witty and good-spirited woman who was most certainly backward in her racial views from the way we look at race questions today, and yet this woman, overweight, in her late fifties, early sixties, would get out of bed at three in the morning and get her old Dodge car out of the garage and drive to downtown Columbus, Georgia, to the jail and put up bond for one of the Negro field hands who would occasionally come in and help her serve a formal dinner party wearing his white jacket. He would have gotten drunk and arrested. She would do that without giving him a lot of grief. It was just something that you did. They adored her and would do anything for her, despite the fact that she regarded them essentially as children, despite the fact that she thought Abraham Lincoln was a terrible man for having had such harsh views of the South.

Mr. Vanderstar: Interesting. On the concept of morality, you mentioned civil rights and you mentioned abortion. Those are of course two crucial issues that people view as involving fundamental moral issues. But one can have a moral position and still not believe that it's the government's business to be involved, so the morality doesn't quite get you to how you vote, does it?

Mr. McPherson: No.

Mr. Vanderstar: Then you have to get into a different notion of your view of the role of government, which may or may not be a "moral" issue.

Mr. McPherson: Right, exactly so.

Mr. Vanderstar: So that gets us to words like "ethics." What kind of a role does ethics play in the legislative process? I think that is a big question or a series of small ones, whichever you like.

Mr. McPherson: There are plenty of examples of people who shaved it close on ethical issues, who nevertheless were powerful and had a lot of sway over what Congress did—though liars and people who could not be trusted to keep their word have a hard time rallying much of a group of comrades on any given issue. That has the same effect in Congress as it has in law firms and anywhere else, any other part of life. Untrustworthy people are not those that one wants to go to the well with, as Johnson used to put it.

We were speaking of the legal realist school. I just read a fascinating review of a biography of William Douglas. The review was written by Judge Posner. It is an excoriation of Douglas as a human being—liar, spectacular philanderer, drunk, all manner of things—and yet, as you read it, there is clearly **an** enormous admiration that Posner feels for him, for his mind, because it is the mind of the legal realist, which Posner is himself, of course. He makes a very

strong case for Douglas as a potentially great jurist who just didn't care enough about being a jurist, didn't commit himself enough to it to be as good as he could. It is clear that Posner is trying to say that a legal realist can be the greatest of all judges—as, for example, “me.”

(laughter)

Ethical issues and political issues don't always travel in the same direction, but they do often influence each other. I always wondered, as I was working in the Senate, about the very nature of the Senate. When you look at the United States you see these vast square tracts. Out West they encompass sand, rocks, cliffs and scrub. Somebody has drawn an imaginary square upon them and called them “states.” Maybe only half a million people live within one of those squares, but they get two senators. And those two senators, if they stay long enough, can become very powerful and make good decisions about urban renewal, about the quality of life of the millions living in cities. Those two senators from such a thinly populated State can have much more power in the Senate by virtue of longevity, personal appeal, or political cunning, or simply by virtue of brain power. They may achieve more than the two senators from Pennsylvania or Illinois or more populous states.

There is a fundamental crap shoot in the politics of the Senate. That is, a citizen born in and living in Idaho or Wyoming gets two people to serve and represent him in the Senate for whom he is one one-millionth; whereas, a fellow from California, just as decent a citizen, has only one thirty-three millionth of a senator as such. And the guy from Idaho may be represented by a particularly gifted senator, a very smart fellow who knows how to play the political game and get stuff for Idaho and may have much more of an impact on national politics than the senator from California. All these things are quite odd. The House of Representatives is much more rational in that sense than the Senate.

One time, long after I was in the Senate, Pat Moynihan asked a few questions about this one day, whether it made much sense to continue this form of representation. We all know why it was done originally back in the 1780s, why it was created this way. It had very specific, practical reasons, in the hope that it would cause these colonies to stay together. But once you start expanding it and you have these anomalies, it raises serious questions—not necessarily ethical questions or moral questions, but political questions they that close to being moral in their consequences, it seems to me.

Mr. Vanderstar: You used the phrase “more rational” in describing the House of Representatives.

Mr. McPherson: In its form.

Mr. Vanderstar: The reasons are obvious. Yet the House generally has the reputation of being the more volatile of the two bodies and the Senate the more deliberative, and the Senate, maybe because of its small numbers, commands more respect in some ways and is typically harder to move along, even though it’s smaller.

Mr. McPherson: Well, it’s true. The thing that gives it that quality, of course, is the filibuster rule. It took me a little while to realize that the filibuster rule was strongly supported by western senators, just as strongly as it was supported by southerners. It was the only thing that gave them power. If you were a Joe O’Mahoney or a Carl Hayden or somebody else from the West, you had two sources of power. One was seniority: if you stayed long enough you could become chairman of a committee and exercise power. The other was the ability to tie the Senate in a knot by filibustering. When I came, it took two-thirds to break that filibuster. In the course of my being there, that was reduced to sixty, but it was still more than a majority.

Mr. Vanderstar: What prompted that change? How did that get accomplished?

Mr. McPherson: Almost certainly the feeling that if it were not done, the unlimited debate rule would be tossed out altogether.

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh. But the senators themselves controlled those rules and answered only to themselves in a sense.

Mr. McPherson: True, but if the Senate continued to block all civil rights legislation, if it would not recognize the revolution that was building in the country on that issue of race relations, then a lot of senators, including a lot of Republicans who normally would have voted with their friends from the South, could not have done so. They would have had to vote to eliminate the rule if they didn't moderate it.

Mr. Vanderstar: You spoke about reports of the committee chair. Does the Senate have a procedure that I think the House has, for the body pulling legislation out of committee even if the committee didn't report it?

Mr. McPherson: That's certainly a question I ought to know the answer to. I think the way it is normally done, the way legislation that is bottled up in committee is normally brought to the Senate for action, is by offering it as an amendment to legislation that is pending on the floor.

For example, in 1960, having passed one civil right bill in 1957, Johnson had committed himself to pass another. It was very hard to figure out how to get that "other" up there. The southerners were on the lookout for any effort to try to take it up. I'm not sure that there was a motion to discharge the committee in the Senate, it's not one I'm familiar with but it could exist.

Mr. Vanderstar: It's a House procedure.

Mr. McPherson: It's a House procedure.

But in 1960 one day Johnson asked me to find him a piece of legislation reported out of the Senate Judiciary Committee. I found the bill, the Stella School District No. 1, a claim bill paying some Missouri school district for something. Johnson motioned it up and then he said to, I think, Senator Hennings, a liberal senator interested in civil rights, "Here's your vehicle." And Hennings offered as an amendment to the Stella Bill what became the 1960 Civil Rights Bill. Russell was furious. Other southerners could hardly speak. Russell could at least speak, and he said this was a highjacking of Senate procedure. Johnson, had he chosen to answer explicitly, would have said, "The real highjacking takes place when Senator Eastland of the Judiciary Committee refuses to allow any civil rights legislation to be reported out. So the only way we have to function is as we've just done."

Mr. Vanderstar: That's really an example of Johnson taking on the southern senators.

Mr. McPherson; Yes. The southerners started a filibuster that went on for a number of days. Johnson said, "Very well, let's let this run all night, night after night, 24 hours a day the Senate's in session," while the southerners are conducting a filibuster. There was one wonderful moment described in someone's book of Johnson going to the Senate floor at three in the morning. There is some question of whether what he had in mind was a motion to proceed to a third reading of the bill at three in the morning, catching unawares whoever was supposed to be on guard among the southerners. Usually there were two southerners, one talking and the other one watching, and whoever was watching was asleep on the floor. Johnson pushed the door open from one side of the Senate Chamber, and at almost the identical moment Richard Russell pushed the door open from the other side. What Russell had in mind was asking that the Senate proceed to the consideration of some other bill, so as get off the Civil Rights Bill altogether.

(laughter)

Mr. Vanderstar: A wonderful story.

Let's pursue the discussion of the notion of the majority. You spoke about two senators from a low-population state, and if those senators win by one vote each, that's a pretty small representation of the voting populace or even if they win by an overwhelming vote in a small state, that's still not much. Yet that senator has as much power as each of the other 100. And if theoretically all members of the Senate won by one vote, it's hard to say that the Senate really represents the people, but it's the only Senate there is. Did you ever struggle with notions like that?

Mr. McPherson: I did.

Mr. Vanderstar: Because I think elections are hardly ever more than about 55 percent or 60 percent. I think 55 percent or more is considered almost a landslide.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, 55 percent is a pretty good-sized vote. Some fellows reach the point of such rock-solid support at home that the other party, if it contests at all, does so with a very weak candidate. Richard Russell, Lister Hill, or somebody like that is going to get 80 percent after several years.

Mr. Vanderstar: But even in a truly contested election, 55 percent is good.

Mr. McPherson: Oh, it's quite good, absolutely. After all, Lyndon Johnson came to the Senate in 1948 having won election in a vote of 1,400,000 people by 87 votes. That was fiercely disputed. The legal issue became whether the Texas Democratic committee could certify Johnson on the basis of the votes for Johnson in a couple of Texas counties where there had clearly been some hanky panky, where the votes were 1,000 to 1 or something like that. That issue was decided, I believe, against Johnson in the Texas District Court. It was appealed

to the Supreme Court where it was heard, I believe, by Justice Black; the two lawyers who represented Johnson were Hugh Cox of Covington and Abe Fortas.

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, boy.

Mr. McPherson: Court was out of session, and Justice Black ruled for Johnson, so he was certified. He came up here in 1949, with an 87-vote majority. In four years he was the Democratic leader of the Senate.

Mr. Vanderstar: That's amazing.

Mr. McPherson: It is.

Mr. Vanderstar: Does an elected person, senator or representative, behave differently if he or she wins by 87 votes as distinguished from 70 percent or even 55 percent? Do they feel more of an obligation to the folks who voted against them or is the attitude, "I won and that's the end of it"?

Mr. McPherson: Well, I think for most of them, that question would more likely be one about the future; they would be very edgy. In today's world, however, and this was not true when I was working in the Senate, senatorial campaigns usually wind up with some money left over, and it's spent on polling. So members who have won narrowly may not necessarily be edgy and reluctant to push in their stacks and to be vigorous senators for the entire six years because the polls that they take frequently show that the public in their states is beginning to think well of them and to give them a higher rating, and the other party doesn't have a real competitor to put up against them.

But I think also much of it has to do just with personality. Hubert Humphrey was a man of enormous vigor and appetite for politics. When he first came he was foolish in the way he behaved toward some institutions of the Senate like Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia, and he

was scorned by the southerners and by many others and felt quite sheepish after a while. He was adopted by Johnson, who liked him, saw how much he needed to be befriended, and did so.

Particularly within the Senate because it is small, much of it has to do with personal relationships. They are all reading the polls back home and they're reading the papers and they are talking to people back home, and many of them travel back on weekends. All of that's important, and they love to get on the Sunday talk shows as you can see, but an enormous amount of it still has to do with personal relationships. There are people that you wouldn't think of as being very significant senators who are, because they have developed personal relationships or have the kind of personality that people are drawn to. There are others that you would think would be quite specially potent because they speak well and they are on the Sunday talk shows a lot and they are the objects of great interest by the press all the time, but they are ignored by their colleagues, or even quite disliked. That plays itself out in legislation, whether people are willing to join up with others.

Mr. Vanderstar: Before we ended the previous day, we got you into the executive branch, into the Department of the Army. So let's move on to that because that raises some new issues that might be fun to discuss. You started out as deputy under-secretary of the Army for international affairs?

Mr. McPherson: Right.

Mr. Vanderstar: That was the Panama Canal Zone, Okinawa.

Mr. McPherson: Right.

Mr. Vanderstar: And then you got the *Corps* of Engineers at some point.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, when Joe Califano, who was general counsel of the Army, was asked to go up and be special assistant to Secretary McNamara, he was doing that *Corps* of

Engineers-related job, that is, being sort of the eyes and ears of the secretary of the Army with respect to the Corps of Engineers. So he was general counsel of the Army but he also had that job. He asked me whether I would take it and I did, I added it to my jobs.

You are from Covington & Burling, **John**, and I'll tell you a story about my beginnings in the Department of the Army and the role a famous Covington partner played in my life. I was 34, I think, and I drove out there in an old black Dodge inherited from my mother-in-law, parked, and went up to my huge office. I found over the years that the longer the title, the bigger the office, the lesser the job. (laughter) As I rose up to be special counsel to the president, I had a room about this size—rather small. But I had a huge office in Defense. I had five colonels working for me, one had the Canal Zone, one had Okinawa, one the civilian aides, and so on. A wonderful bunch of men. I liked them enormously.

In my first few days at the Pentagon, I was taken to lunch by Cy Vance, the secretary of the Army, or by Steve Ailes, who was the under-secretary of the Army. He had been a partner at Steptoe & **Johnson**, a very fine and amusing man. I was taken to the General Officers' Mess No. 1, a marvelous little restaurant, spectacularly good food. Cocktails before lunch, if you wanted; I never had one but some did. The only people allowed in that mess were generals and about eight civilians. When I began, being taken by the secretary of the Army and the under-secretary, I was pleasantly received by the generals. When I no longer could go to lunch with my bosses, I had to go by myself. I didn't know anybody else over there, I didn't know any of the generals, and I really hadn't gotten to know any of the civilians. So after a few weeks, I'd pretty much run out of things to ask these generals about, and they were not particularly interested in talking to a young political appointee who had a job responsibility that didn't have much to do with most of them.

If I had been the assistant secretary for personnel, then I would have had an impact on them. But most of them had nothing to do with the Panama Canal or Okinawa. And they had very little apparent curiosity about the Senate, the place where I had just been, and I didn't feel right about imposing talk about the Senate on them. That was not what they did, they were military people. After I had run out of questions to ask a general who had been on the Death March in Bataan—there were really quite a large number of heavily decorated officers there—I didn't know quite what to do to kind of establish myself.

So I called the biggest figure I could think of, with whom I had a conversation over dinner one night about this experience I was having—Dean G. Acheson. I had become friends with his daughter Mary Bundy and her husband, Bill Bundy, and I was beginning to spend quite a lot of time with them. As a consequence, I spent a fair amount of time with Acheson, went out to his farm in Sandy Springs, played tennis, swam, looked at his gardens and woodworking tools. I was absolutely fascinated by him. He didn't hesitate to tell me what to look out for in life and how to operate. He was kind of a Dutch Uncle.

I called him one day and said, "I'm a little bit down in the mouth out here," and I told him what the situation was. "I'd really like it if you would come to lunch. The food's wonderful, and you can have a martini before lunch." And he said, "Well, I'd be delighted. How about tomorrow?" And I said, "Wonderful." So the next day Acheson, as always spectacularly dressed—

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, yes.

Mr. McPherson: —came to my office. The colonels working for me were flabbergasted. They all lined up, and after I'd showed him around my office we walked down the hall and we pulled into this little mess. One thing about Acheson, one of the many things

about him was that he was unmistakable,

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, yes.

Mr. McPherson: If you were 30 years old or older you knew who Dean Acheson was. No one looked like that in America.

Mr. Vanderstar: Right.

Mr. McPherson: We sat down, and the sergeant came over to take our orders. Acheson ordered a martini and I think I did too. I figured, you know, he's going to have one, so I would. Well, the impact was spectacular. (laughter) Within the next 15 minutes, at least four generals came over and stood in line like people in a wedding reception, just shifting from foot to foot, licking their lips getting ready to make their presentation of their name, rank and serial number and to introduce themselves. One said he did so with great pride, having served in Korea when he was secretary of state and his leadership had been so dramatic. I don't think I can say that all this set me up for the rest of my year in the Pentagon but it certainly did me a lot of good. (laughter)

I have to tell another Acheson story that is sort of like this and kind of relates both to my government career and my subsequent career as a lawyer representing business people as we all do. Acheson was about to leave office in 1952, and he thought he ought to go to the UN and make a talk thanking the UN for joining the United States in the great effort to save Korea. This was the most impressive time the UN had gotten together since its formation, and Acheson had obviously had a leading role in that. The question became: if the Achesons stayed in the Waldorf Astoria Towers where the UN ambassador's apartment is, should they invite another inhabitant of the Waldorf Astoria Towers, Douglas McArthur and his wife, to come have a cocktail? Acheson thought they should. Alice Acheson was appalled at the idea that this

pompous martinet who had said such terrible things about Acheson and Truman should be invited anywhere by them. Well, he insisted and the staffs of the two mighty figures worked it out. The MacArthurs would come at six o'clock and leave promptly at 7:30.

At six o'clock exactly there was a knock on the door, and the MacArthurs were there. Acheson made his Silver Bullets, his martinis, and they had two or three of them. He said the conversation—he told this story to David Acheson who told it to me—the conversation was very amenable, they were having an extremely good time talking. Acheson was truly sorry when, at exactly 7:30, McArthur said, "Jean, it's time for us to leave," and he stood up. Acheson didn't try to talk him out of it. He said, "General, before you go let me ask you a question." He said, "You have in your matchless career served with more great figures, great public figures, statesmen, generals, than probably anyone alive. Probably no one has had the range that you have had of experience with great public figures. Now, the last couple of years you have been serving on corporate boards with captains of industry. I wonder how you compare these industrial giants with those public figures that you knew over your career." And McArthur said, "Oh, Acheson, let's don't talk about midgets."

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, boy. Midgets? (laughter) A pretty deft answer to the question. Wow, that's a wonderful story.

Let's see, getting back to the Army: After your successful lunch by getting Dean Acheson to come over, things got better for you socially, at least, as far as lunch was concerned. How was the work? Was it interesting? Was it challenging?

Mr. McPherson: It was. Essentially it was overseeing the civil side of the Army insofar as the Army had obligations as governor of the Canal Zone and administrator of Okinawa. The secretary of the Army is specifically designated as the head of the Panama Canal

Company, the guy to whom the Panama Canal government reports.

Mr. Vanderstar: Was he the sole shareholder or something like that?

Mr. McPherson: Yes, indeed he was, The secretary of the Army is also the fellow who oversees Okinawa—or did oversee it, I'm not sure how that's done today. There was a very large military force out there. There was a Ryukyuan government, and the Army secretary had ultimate responsibility for dealing with that government.

I went to Panama. I spent a week or so down there traveling through the Canal and getting to talk to Zonians. There are 5,000 or 6,000 Americans, very competent, blue-collar workers. They had passionate advocates in the Congress. A congressman named Dan Flood from Pennsylvania, with a waxed moustache, was the leader. A woman named Lenore Sullivan from Missouri was another. And they really fought for the Zonians. I can't remember why it was that they had that profound dedication to the Zone, but they sure did. And they were in positions in the House to make some impact on the Army as it dealt with the Zone.

I had a couple of colonels who were quite able. They were West Pointers, good military career officers. These colonels who worked for me had all gone as far as they were going to go. They were not going to be general officers, and they had all had a big interest in international affairs and had all, I believe, gotten masters degrees in international affairs at George Washington University. They were intelligent, good spirited, highly competent, practical men. They treated me extremely well, very respectfully, and I think they probably saw that I had some experience that was useful in this work and had some acquaintanceships that might come in handy.

In the late fall or early winter of 1963, I developed a great passion for squash and racquetball, and I went almost every day in the late afternoon and played with somebody from

one of the services. I was really enjoying my life at the Pentagon.

Mr. Vanderstar: Did you go Okinawa?

Mr. McPherson: I did. I went to Okinawa in mid-November of '63 and it was there, or actually in Tokyo on the way back, when I got the news of Kennedy's assassination.

Mr. Vanderstar: On the Panama and Okinawa responsibilities, and even looking ahead to your other positions in the executive branch before you got to the White House: Did you ever wonder why, if I may, an amateur was running such an enormous, important enterprise? Why somebody like you, who had no background in foreign affairs, no background in how to run a canal and so on—granted you had experience in participating in government—but did you ever find it odd that the system put you in that position or a person like you in that position?

Mr. McPherson: Well, I'm sure that better trained people than I for these roles could have been found, but I found that legal training and political experience were both valuable. Laws and regulations covered these areas, and I was familiar with the world of laws and regulations, as well as with the politicians who wrote them, insisted on them, or complained about them.

There was a man named Fleming, a major general, very liberal toward Panamanians who ran the Canal Zone in Panama. He was very strongly persuaded that Panama would one day operate the Canal and that the Zone would be no more. He was right about that.

On the other hand, the three-star general in Okinawa was a martinet and absolutely positive that he and he alone should look after the people of Okinawa. His name was Paul Caraway. He ran Okinawa like a fiefdom and did everything he possibly could to prevent the Japanese government from having anything to do with the island. He justified that in his own mind on the grounds that Tokyo had always treated Okinawa as a benighted province and

had never given proper time and attention to the people of Okinawa. He was determined to do so, and he was very proud of the schools that had been built with American money and hospitals and all the rest of it. He treated the Okinawans like children and the Japanese as if they were interlopers.

Fleming in Panama irritated the Zonians no end, because he was so open to the Panamanians and so determined to bring in more Panamanian workers and give the Republic of Panama more participation in the operation of the Canal. I thought Fleming was right and I fought for him. I thought Caraway was probably doing a lot for the people of Okinawa but that it would be ultimately harmful to our relations with Japan, which had to be more important than how that island was run.

So I was in the middle of a political scene, and I had certain statutory and legal frameworks around me applicable to both the Zone and to the Ryukyuan government. I found that both political experience and the legal training helped me, even though I didn't know a heck of a lot about foreign affairs. I had always been interested in them, and that was a benefit of its own.

Mr. Vanderstar: Okay. Then when the Corps of Engineers was added to your portfolio, did that introduce yet a different problem?

Mr. McPherson: I realized that no matter how hard I tried to be on top of the Corps of Engineers for the secretary of the Army, that they weren't really looking at either me or the secretary of the Army for guidance. They were looking to Congress to tell them what to do and to back them up. They are very capable people, the officers of the corps. The corps had a lot of graduates from West Point, a lot of engineers and mathematicians, fellows who had wound up quite naturally in an engineer detachment.

They were keen to show me their projects. I went out to travel the Mississippi and became an honorary pilot of a vessel on the Mississippi. I went over to a lake in Mississippi, a reservoir operated by the corps. They had built a dam on a river and built up a good-sized lake behind it. There was a very attractive inn on the lake, but it was for Whites only. The odd thing about it was that along the lake White guys and Black guys were fishing, sitting within 20 or 30 feet of each other, their pickup trucks backed up with the tailgates down and cots on the bed of the truck where they spent the night and had cookouts right there. So they were quite accustomed to recreating together along the shore, but Blacks couldn't go and use the inn.

So when I got back I called a meeting of the district engineers when they were in town for some other purpose; this was in the summer of '64. Congress was working its will on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I said, "I've just been down the Mississippi, and I just don't think a federal government agency such as ours has any business operating a facility that is not open to all Americans. It made me feel very uncomfortable to be down there and to be part of the Corps of Engineers. I'm proud to be associated with you folks, but I'm not proud to be related to that discrimination." Well, they listened to me, very carefully. They sort of bit their lips, and several fellows made notes, as if what I was saying had to be written down on a pad. But I wasn't really getting anywhere until I said, "You know, the Congress is about to pass a civil rights act, and if it is anything like the one that's on the Senate floor today, it will ban discrimination in public places like this. So let's don't wait for Congress to make us do this, let's do what Congress clearly is intending to do. Let's beat them to it."

And you know, just talking about Congress, saying that Poppa says this is okay, Poppa wants this, had an enormous effect. Everybody got very enthusiastic. (laughter)

Mr. Vanderstar: Pressing the right button.

Mr. McPherson: Yes.

Mr. Vanderstar: You say in your book something about the engineers said that “We were Congress’ engineers” or something like that.

Mr. McPherson: Right.

Mr. Vanderstar: And that’s a good story to reinforce that. Lets finish up with the Army and then get to the State Department.

Mr. McPherson: The big moment of my time in the Army, which I described in the book, was the riot that occurred in Panama in January of 1964. I was tom between looking after my wife, who had the mumps at home, and trying to take care of my little daughter and get her to school, and rushing back to the Pentagon where, at about nine o’clock in the morning—the riot had started the night before—it was decided that I should go to Panama with Cy Vance and two or three other people, including a man we picked up in a helicopter at the CIA. We flew down and spent four or five days there.

The other day I had an unforgettable experience. I was listening to the Johnson tapes that are being played on C-Span Radio on Saturday afternoons. My wife and I were driving, and Johnson was talking to Senator Russell about the riot in Panama. Russell had various ideas. He said, “It’s probably Castro, and we probably ought to move some fighters down there. Don’t want to attack anybody, but just show them we’re prepared if anybody tries to do anything to take over the Canal.” They talked, and of course I was interested in this because I had been involved in it. Johnson said, “I’m going to send down a team of people.” He said, “I’m going to send Cy Vance and I’m going to send Tom Mann [he was assistant secretary of state for Latin America], and you’ll be interested in this,” he said to Russell. “I’m going to send Harry McPherson.” And Russell said, “Well, you couldn’t have found a better boy than

that.” (laughter) “A better boy.” I was 34 years old. And he said, “If he’s going to go in there, they won’t pull the wool over his eyes. He’s going tell you exactly what’s going on there. You’ve got the right fellow going down there.” It was wonderful to hear Richard Russell say this to Johnson on the tape.

Anyway, I came back here after the trip, and Joe Califano and I went back about two weeks later to prepare the case for the United States before some kind of OAS tribunal. The purpose was to see if the United States had overreacted and if we had done anything that was particularly harsh to the Panamanians.

When we first went down there, I think it was the first time I was ever conscious of being in harm’s way. There was an old hotel called the Tivoli, like something out of a Tennessee Williams’ play, right on the border between the Canal Zone and Panama on Fourth of July Avenue. It was manned by a company of GIs. It was being shot at by Panamanians in high-rise office buildings across the Avenue. We went there. We stopped about 100 yards away from it, turned the lights off, sat in the darkness, and we decided to walk over to the hotel and see what was going on. I was with Vance, the secretary of the Army, and Ralph Dungan, who was in the Kennedy White House. I went just behind Dungan, maybe 20 yards behind him, in complete darkness, we didn’t have flashlights or anything. You could hear this pop! pop! pop! like fireworks. Dungan, to my horror, was smoking a cigar, and as he walked along the cigar was making an arc. I was about 20 feet behind him and said, (excited whisper) “Dungan, put out that cigar before we get shot!” And he put it out. (laughter) It was a real experience.

Mr. Vanderstar: It sounds like a real experience.

Mr. McPherson: Right. Then, in the summer of ‘64, one of my best friends in Washington, a man named Ben Reed who was the executive secretary of the State Department,

called and said, “Luke Battle [another Dutch nephew of Acheson] has been assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, the Fulbright program and all of that, and he’s going to Egypt as ambassador. Would you like to succeed him as assistant secretary of state?”

Well, just out of sheer ambitious glamour, the glamour of being 35 years old and an assistant secretary of state, I said, “Sure.” And the process began. Califano said that McNamara was astounded that I would do this. He said, “You know, its a backwater in the State Department. It doesn’t amount to anything. I’m about to make him assistant secretary of defense for legislation,” which would have been really interesting. I had had a little experience with it simply because of my background in the Congress. I had been asked on several occasions to come to breakfast in the secretary of defense’s network and to talk with members of Congress, who were usually complaining about some weapon system that was getting cut out. If that job had materialized, I would have become a guy on the run between the Pentagon and the Congress, going up to try to persuade people to go along with McNamara’s policies at the Pentagon, which were much more—what should I say? He had modernized the Pentagon and was running it on a much more severe and—

Mr. Vanderstar: Business like?

Mr. McPherson: —business-likebasis, yes. In any event, I didn’t know that was happening and I was on my way to the State Department.

Mr. Vanderstar: So you had already committed to take the State Department position?

Mr. McPherson: Yes. And since I had already had very high security clearances, I got in pretty quickly into the State Department. I went for a confirmation hearing with the father of these exchange programs, Senator Fulbright. I had gotten to know him pretty well

while working in the Senate. He said, “Well, do you know anything about these programs, these exchange programs?” And I said, “No.” I just left it at that. He said “Well, do you want to learn?” (laughter) I said, “Yes, very much.” In all of about 15 minutes I was approved. The other senators did the usual, “Oh, I’m so glad to have ~~Harry~~ back with us” and all that.

Mr. Vanderstar: Not a big floor fight.

Mr. McPherson: Not much of a floor fight. One of the nicest things in my scrapbooks from that period, those years, are some speeches various people made when I left the Senate and went off to the Army. A number of senators — Dirksen, Russell, Mansfield, Tommy Kuchel of California, nice people I worked with—made speeches that I much appreciated. So I didn’t worry about getting confirmed for the State Department job. I was sworn in by Secretary Rusk pretty close to my 35th birthday.