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DAVID AARON

EXIT INTERVIEW

ALLEN: This is an interview with David Aaron on December 15, 1980. Marie Allen is the interviewer. We are on the first floor, West Wing.

First, I'd like to ask you about your background before you came to the White House--your educational background and then your professional background.

AARON: I was an undergraduate at Occidental College in California, where I mostly grew up, and then I did graduate work at Princeton at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. I got my degree there, joined the Foreign Service in 1962, and I served in the Foreign Service for about six years. I served first in South America and then in Washington on the NATO desk. I served in NATO in Paris, and then I came back to Washington, and then I left the Foreign Service. Before I did so, I was in the Political and Military Bureau at the State Department and worked on SALT under the Lyndon Johnson administration, which was ended by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. I then joined the Arms Control Agency, and I worked first in New York at the UN. Subsequently I worked on SALT II when the Nixon administration came in. And I was in that negotiation for four years until the spring of 1972, when I joined the National Security Council staff under Dr. [Henry] Kissinger. I became the director of the Program Analysis Staff at the National Security Council.

I left that to go to work for Senator [Walter] Mondale when he was getting ready to run for President, and I did some things for him in that regard--went to Europe and to Moscow, worked on some articles, and so forth. And then he dropped out of the race, and I worked for him on the Church Committee, which was investigating the Central Intelligence Agency, where I ran a task force which handled the White House and National Security Council part of the intelligence community and certain other aspects of the Agency's activities. And I edited the final report and recommendations of the Committee. And then the campaign came along, and the Senator was chosen as Vice-President, and so I worked in Atlanta with the Vice-President's campaign. And then during the transition I was named to the transition for the National Security Council and the CIA. When Zbig [Brzezinski] came on board, he asked me to stay as his deputy, which I did.

ALLEN: Could you comment now that you've had experience on the NSC under two different administrations how the NSC has differed in its organization, its direction? Dr. Brzezinski made a comment that he wanted less acrobatics and more architecture, I think, when he first accepted the National Security Adviser's job. How would you contrast the two NSCs?

AARON: [Chuckle] I think we've had more acrobatics and less structure. The NSC period with which I was associated was at the

end of the [William] Rogers State Department period and the beginning of Kissinger's State Department. There was not a struggle between the State Department and the NSC--the NSC simply ran it and Defense, and it was a pretty tight ship. We've never had that in this administration, and there has been much more of a struggle going on, a struggle which I think has contributed to the impression that this country was not in control of world events. That's what I think was to our detriment.

But the structure of the two organizations is quite similar then and now--the structure that I basically designed for us to keep. The formal and structural elements have been the same as the Kissinger NSC but have allowed for more spontaneity and creativity, which we have had in this administration. So we streamlined it and got rid of so many different committees and ended up with just two. We've added some elements since it was first organized, a sub-committee, a mini-SCC which I chair, which is at the sub-Cabinet level, helped a lot both in preparing the decisions and in implementing them. It's kind of a pre- and post-committee arrangement to solve a lot of hang-ups and get the issues defined more carefully.

ALLEN: This was something that existed under the previous NSC?

AARON: Well, the previous NSC operated at the sub-Cabinet level. For instance, when Dr. Kissinger chaired these various committees, they usually were not attended by Cabinet-level people. The Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State did not come. It was the Under Secretary or the Deputy Secretaries. What happened was that committee was raised to the Cabinet level in this administration, and there was nothing at the sub-Cabinet level, so we filled in that particular level because it is simply necessary to do that. Also, the value of this mini-SCC was that I was never a stickler for level of attendance. I wanted people there who were either effective or knowledgeable or both. So, therefore, I didn't mind if you had desk officers and Assistant Secretaries there. I just wanted to be sure that people were there who counted.

ALLEN: When you say mini-SCC, you mean Special Coordinating Committee?

AARON: That's right.

ALLEN: So you managed to take up the issues and the positions, do most of the desk work and the background work at this mini level?

AARON: Depending on the issue. Sometimes you did it completely because the more senior officials just didn't want to be involved in the issue. Or it was sufficiently complex that you had to narrow the issues down to a size at which you could begin to focus on what the real problem is. That isn't always obvious. In a crisis situation we didn't necessarily meet at that level. [Inaudible] things were moving too fast. [Inaudible] Iraq, Iran,

Poland we met continuously at that level either to implement decisions or for contingency planning.

ALLEN: How frequently would you say that you have met on the average? Do you meet once a week?

AARON: Sure. Twice probably on different subjects.

ALLEN: In a crisis situation you might meet...

AARON: Every day. We've met three times a week on Poland. But usually on contingency planning, not to make decisions.

ALLEN: And the persons on this committee are sub-Cabinet level folks from State Department, Defense, CIA...

AARON: It ranges from the Deputy Secretary down to the Assistant Secretary. It sort of depends on the subject.

ALLEN: And all the units are represented that are represented on the National Security Council?

AARON: Yes, although it will change. You may have Commerce and Treasury there and not ACDA [Arms Control and Disarmament Agency] or you may have ACDA, depending on the subject matter.

ALLEN: Is there any issue, for instance the normalization with China, the issue that was so closely held and so suddenly revealed...did you work with this at the mini level, also, or was that one of the issues that didn't...

AARON: Only at the very end when it became necessary to announce the decision.

ALLEN: What about the Middle East peace treaties that were worked out at Camp David?

AARON: We handled that in a sort of different way. We put together a thing called a planning group and that group really...finally the [inaudible] we had three or four people from State and a couple people from NSC and a domestic person and so forth, the Vice President would show up and it was a much more informal arrangement. We would just meet to talk about our next steps and strategy. I didn't chair that. It was usually sort of chaired by Zbig, sometimes by Cy. We haven't used it since Bob Strauss left that job. Of course, not much has happened since then, either.

ALLEN: I want to go back and ask you some chronological questions about the various foreign policy issues. First, I remember reading in the newspaper that Dr. Brzezinski reported he had a ninety-day foreign policy plan for this administration to implement. Were you

involved in the structuring of that plan, and what was it?

AARON: I can't remember. Yes, I was involved.

ALLEN: It has been four years.

AARON: Zbig and Henry Allen and Richard Gardner had written a nine or ten point program of things to be done in the next administration. I had nothing to do with that. They brought it before the President, and they generally speaking followed that program. And a good number of the things on that list, surprisingly, have been accomplished. The first thing I can recall we put together after Zbig came on board was a program of action for those first ninety days. All I can remember is we did it. I can't remember what our priorities were or how it was structured.

ALLEN: As we get to closer years this will be much easier. We don't intend for you to prepare for this. Just what sticks out in your mind.

AARON: One thing that sticks out in my mind is the first thing we did was Panama, which I always refer to as a serious mistake.

ALLEN: That was my next question. What do you think about the Panama Canal treaties?

AARON: Well, it was very important to do it, but I think it was wrong to make that the first NSC meeting we ever had and the first PRM [Presidential Review Memorandum], the first Presidential Decision memo we ever had. We paid a very great price. We got no credit whatsoever for political...we built no momentum. I think it was a classic example of misplaced priorities and being pushed on by the bureaucracy which had brought these negotiations to a certain point and insisted that we must go ahead. It was, if you ask me, our Bay of Pigs.

ALLEN: The argument was made that this was a very important issue for Latin American relations, that the Panama Canal situation was a blockage of our Latin American relations. How do you see...?

AARON: I agree with that. I'm just saying that you don't have to do it first. You could have had a few other successes under our belt. You know, you could have gotten a SALT agreement and then a Panama Canal treaty. We couldn't get them in reverse order.

ALLEN: And the urgency you see there was built in by the previous negotiations.

AARON: And there were a lot of people who came on board who thought this was a great thing to do, and it was a typical [inaudible] doing things peacefully.

ALLEN: Why do you think these were important to the President and to Dr. Brzezinski?

AARON: I think as far as they were concerned, it was simply an agenda we had to get through. There were certain things they had to get out of the way. We had a ninety-day agenda, but we did not have a four-year agenda. Looking back on it, what we needed was something that said the first year we want to do this, the second year we want to do that, and by the fourth year we want to have accomplished this, and pretty much in this order. We didn't have that. We had a list of things we wanted to do, and a ninety-day agenda on how to get started, and that was about it. We had no sort of political scenario, if you will, no flow chart that told us when we wanted certain things to come on stream and certain things to come on stream later. If I've learned anything in this job, it is that you'd better plan the whole four years, not just the first ninety days.

ALLEN: What do you think the importance to the President was of these treaties?

AARON: They were very important in a sense in that he viewed them as a statement about human rights, a statement about equality. He viewed them as a statement about justice, and I think he viewed them in a sense as a statement about the end of colonialism and racism in our relationship with Latin America. I think they are extremely good, and I'm proud of having done them. I just think he should have done it in a little different sequence so that the result was that he was praised as being a wise and determined leader, as opposed to just how we got through that one, which is about how it was viewed.

ALLEN: Did anyone raise the issue of the timing and of the political consequences and of the political opposition? Do you think that was clearly discussed?

AARON: No. I don't think so, but I don't know for sure. I don't think so because I think everyone said, "Oh, it's going to be a terrible problem, so we might as well do it now when you have your mandate." The thing that a President has to understand is that there are literally thousands of people out there who are dying to spend your mandate for you. The President's job is not to spend his mandate, but to invest it so that he gets some political credit back so he can keep on being President. You can not only get re-elected, which is another question, but also have more political power when he comes to his next fight. I am not a politician, but I am enough of an observer that I think it is fair to say that there are two kinds of fights that you can have--two kinds of fights that you can win--a win which leaves you debilitated or weaker and a win which makes you stronger. All I'm saying is that the Panama Canal treaties having come first were bound to be the kind to make you weaker.

ALLEN: Setting aside the political effect on the President of them, do you think they were well designed in themselves?

AARON: The arrangements were very good. I think the Canal is running well, and the current crisis we are having first in Nicaragua and now in El Salvador--if we did not have the Panama Canal treaties in place, we could have these problems plus guerrilla warfare in Panama. I don't think there is any doubt that it was a wise and necessary thing to do. I'm not against it on substance. I'm for it on substance.

ALLEN: Were you involved in the negotiations yourself? In working out problems?

AARON: Mainly in policy formation. Is it time to go with the second economic concession or is it not time to go? Can we do this, can we not do this?

ALLEN: Let me ask you next about the human rights issue. This seems to have been a commitment on the President's part before he entered office and also on Brzezinski's. Is this how you see it? They very firmly committed themselves to the human rights issue? Or is this something that evolved during the term? How do you see that?

AARON: Well, a little bit of both. It was a commitment. The President had articulated it. It was in a sense a Democratic Party commitment because so many members of the Congress prior to the election had been speaking out on it and felt that the previous administration was insensitive to it. So it was sort of in the air, if you will. Dr. Brzezinski felt strongly about it, particularly in certain areas of the world. The President had put his name on behalf of this in a generalized sense. The Vice President had been a leading advocate of human rights matters in the Senate.

So all these elements were in place, but the crystallizing impetus to make it a major issue was the fact that the Soviets shortly before the inauguration, beginning in about November, began to crack down on the dissidents in the Soviet Union and the Helsinki monitors, and the people who are now out were in jail-- [Anatoly] Shcharansky, [Andrei] Sakharov had his apartment ransacked, and [Yuri] Orlov, and [Aleksandr] Ginzburg was picked up. All these things started happening even prior to the administration coming into power. We were immediately confronted with having to react to this, including a letter from Sakharov to the President saying, "Say something. Do something." Which he did. That gave it a particularly anti-Soviet focus and quite frankly gave us an issue with the Soviets right from the outset that I think cast a shadow over our efforts to work out our relationship with them the whole four years. It was something widely interpreted that somehow Jimmy Carter had gone out of his

way to put a stick in the Russian's eye on this subject, and how could he expect therefore to go on and have a reasonable foreign policy relationship with them? It was really the other way around. They put a very big stick in his eye before he got into power and presented a fait accompli, and he clearly had to react to that kind of thing.

ALLEN: What do you think the successes have been?

AARON: Well, I think the successes have been quite great. First of all, we got a lot of people out. Number two, there are a lot of people still alive who would in former times be dead. There has been quite a high level of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union throughout this whole period. Throughout the whole world there are literally thousands and thousands of people who are alive and out of jail because of our intervention.

We learned very early some iron rules of this issue, such as never take credit and never single out the countries by name, and that quiet diplomacy is very important, but it's got to be real. The problem with the Kissinger period is that they talked quiet diplomacy, but in fact they didn't do anything--often didn't. Whether in Africa, Latin America, people in jail in Argentina.

We have, I think due to this country's commitment to democracy and human rights a democratic government in Peru, a democratic government in Ecuador, the first election in the Dominican Republic in which there was a change of party--that was usually done by gun point. You have literally tens of thousands of political prisoners released in Asia. You have not that many, but certainly hundreds throughout Latin America. I believe we are going to be successful--I can be wrong--in making sure that Kim Dae Jung does not get executed in Korea. These are all human rights triumphs, and they wouldn't have happened, just wouldn't have happened.

ALLEN: Has it been primarily the leverage of aid money that has been successful in applying pressure?

AARON: No, it's not mechanical like that. It's moral suasion. It's the overall economic relationship. It's very difficult to make specific threats like that. It gets people's backs up. It's harder to manipulate them, harder to handle them. You just have to make it clear that the human rights record is taken into account. If you make some changes there, all sorts of good things can happen. If you don't make changes there, all sorts of good things won't happen, and maybe some bad. When you get mechanistic about it, it's a very bad idea. In Argentina, for example, under the Kennedy amendment we had this bizarre situation where if we cut off military assistance because of what they've done in the human rights area, but even if they all became saints tomorrow, we could never resume. It's been cut off for all time. You have a stick with no carrot--not a very good situation.

ALLEN: You just talked about the successes. What about the failures, where on the human rights issue you have not been successful?

AARON: There are two kinds of failures. There are the failures in the sense that human rights might prevail, and that didn't happen in this generation, and people died and were in jail and so forth. I certainly think you still have to say that is the case in the Soviet Union. The question is really whether we made it worse or better. I would argue we made it better. We've made it harder to engage in a repression as deep as they would like. Others might argue very differently, that we gave it so much attention that they had no choice but to crack down on these people. But I think the attention that we gave to it really made a difference, just like in Poland. Our attention to the Polish situation didn't cause them to invade. Quite the contrary, I think so far the attention we have given to it has called them to halt, to slow down. In the end, they may well do it. Will that be a failure of our policy? I don't think so. Will it be a failure of human rights in the abstract? Clearly so.

ALLEN: In the process of making decisions on foreign policy matters relating to human rights, would most of the decisions end up being made by the President, or would this human rights advocacy policy be implemented at lower levels? Would the State Department routinely carry out...

AARON: I think the State Department would have a very large role. At the beginning of an administration the President has a very big role, but as time goes on these things are carried out one by one. For example, the Vice President had a big role in the situation in Indonesia, which he visited early on or reasonably early on. And as a result of that visit, they let a lot of people out of jail.

ALLEN: How did he do that? Through moral suasion?

AARON: Essentially when he went to them he had some carrots, he had some sticks. He showed that we cared about that country.

ALLEN: How do you balance non-interference in the internal affairs of the country with this kind of persuasion relating to human rights?

AARON: If you say that the world community has a right and an obligation to care about other members of the world community regardless of their government, you've already said that some things are more important than internal affairs. It's a little bit like the question the Romans asked Jesus. He gives unto God what belongs to God and gives unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but retains for himself the right to decide.

ALLEN: It seems to me the world is very sensitive about this

interference in internal affairs issue for the superpowers in particular.

AARON: Well, you know, that depends on the situation. Right now there's going to be a resolution in the UN today which condemns El Salvador for its internal human rights situation. It's going to be voted for by those great human rights supporters Cuba, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria. They don't seem to think that that's a violation of internal affairs in El Salvador. But you pass the same resolution about them, then all of a sudden that's a very big issue for them.

ALLEN: Do you see a difference in the various characters involved in human rights policy making? Do you think the White House has been a more fervent advocate of this than the State Department or vice versa? At the NSC, how would you evaluate the attitudes there?

AARON: It tends to be very much a product of the individuals who are involved, I'm sorry to say. It is not an institutionalized concern. Pat Derian has been deeply concerned about it. Jessica Mathews when she was with us was deeply concerned about it. Zbig has been working with it in specific areas. The President, the Vice President. But it tends to be not systematic and not institutionalized. Generally speaking, the State Department has been worried about the human rights performance of our friends while the National Security Council has been more concerned about the human rights activities of our adversaries.

ALLEN: Is that because adversaries are more difficult to deal with--it requires a little higher level handling?

AARON: I think part of it is ideological orientation, part of it is the Department's responsiveness to Congress. Congress can't do much to our adversaries, but they can cut the aid off to our friends. So you get a deeper concern from that standpoint.

ALLEN: Has Pat Derian been involved in all these human rights issues?

AARON: Very much so.

ALLEN: You said there was no restriction to country or area as far as she was concerned.

AARON: She was very, very active and very effective.

ALLEN: Let me ask you a few quick questions about the Middle East peace treaty process. What was your role overall in that?

AARON: As far as Camp David itself was concerned I didn't have...I was busy down here. They were all up there. I was sort of

watching the store while the Camp David...I would say the principal role that I played in the whole process would be during the visit of the Vice President to Israel earlier that year, '78. We had been for many, many years, along with the Labor government in Israel, trying for a formula for the ultimate solution of the situation on the West Bank withdrawal, and that's the language of Resolution 338. And there was a big argument over whether you would make minor changes in the borders from 1968 or make major changes in the borders, and what to do about settlements and the relationship with Jordan. And Moshe Dayan had been pursuing the idea of autonomy for the West Bank, and I think it was when we came to Jerusalem and had our talks with Begin and had some separate talks with Moshe Dayan that we came to recognize the fact that autonomy would mean that you could finesse the question of the boundary of the West Bank because autonomy was to apply to the whole West Bank right up to the old 1968 border. And if it were a genuine return, it might be more satisfactory in territorial terms and amount to the same thing in political terms as withdrawal. That is something we had not gotten clear in our own minds prior to that visit, and it was that visit where we were convinced that we could pursue autonomy and not withdrawal. That was the subsequent basis on which we could even go to Camp David and begin to deal with the other issues such as the Sinai and so forth with the Egyptians.

ALLEN: Were there other issues in this area in which you were similarly involved?

AARON: Not so much in the Middle East. That was more Zbig.

ALLEN: In the first couple of years of this administration, the Panama Canal treaties and the human rights issue and the Middle East were things that stick out in my mind. What were the things in the early part of the administration that stick out in your mind that you were primarily involved in, had a particular role in?

AARON: One was the SALT negotiations.

ALLEN: You had a background of working in Soviet-American relations? Describe what your role was in that.

AARON: Well, I had been in the SALT negotiations for four years during the Kissinger period, the Nixon period, on the delegation meeting with them in Helsinki and in Vienna, and I think it fair to say that our first proposal, which was rejected by the Soviets, was one which both Harold Brown and myself were the principal authors of. That's a whole period in which I think we did the right thing, and I think we have a much better SALT treaty for having gone in that direction. But it was a much more comprehensive proposal than was being negotiated.

There are those now who feel that we should have just had some cosmetic agreement and gotten on to some other negotiation.

I still don't think that's correct. I don't think we could have gotten a cosmetic agreement. In fact, we went to the Soviets in March of '77 with two proposals. Most people only remember the comprehensive one, but we gave them two. One was to just reduce the stock, the cruise missiles and all the rest of it. Let's just do that and get on with the negotiations, the very same thing people said we should have done. But we did propose that, and that was totally unacceptable. The more comprehensive proposal that we also put forward was also rejected by the Soviets, but in fact they came back to negotiate that, and they were not ever willing to negotiate a stripped down, very simple, Vladivostok type agreement.

I think there were two major flaws in all of that. One was that we never said anything to the Soviets before we got there. Second, it was a big circus. The Secretary of State took a great number of people with him, a bunch of newspaper people. He met with the Soviets, and then he left and gave a press conference about how it had been rejected. It was foolishness. Even Henry Kissinger said afterwards, "Hell, I've been to Moscow a half a dozen times and I've failed every time I've gone, but I never had a press conference to announce to the world that that was the case." So I think it was handled very badly from a diplomatic standpoint.

Even so, I don't think we would have gotten the whole proposal, but we did end up getting some major parts of it. And there are those who believe we should have gotten an agreement faster, but these things take their time. You can't push it, or if you do push it, you've got to know when to push it, and you've really got to determine to push. We just kept working at it, and it worked out in all due time. But it didn't work out in time to not run afoul of election year politics and a lot of other things.

ALLEN: Those were very complicated negotiations. What stands out in your mind? Are there specific personal encounters that stand out in your mind in dealing with the Russians or are there specific issues that were the thorniest ones? What do you remember personally?

AARON: In the fall of '77, in September, the Soviet Union came back and agreed to some limits on their MIRVed ICBMs and then agreed to count certain missile silos that ordinarily had MIRVed ICBMs in them, but that we knew did not have them as a matter of practicality. But they agreed to count those as MIRVed. That to me demonstrated that they were not only ready to accept in principle the idea of limitations, but they were prepared to even cut back and accept a significant disadvantage, which led me to believe that we had an agreement or would have one soon. In fact, it took another year and a half to get an agreement. Looking back on it, I think that perhaps we could have pushed forward much harder, much faster, but there were those in the administration who wanted us to normalize relations with China first. So there was a balance to be struck.

ALLEN: Who were the important people particularly involved in the SALT negotiations in NSC and State and Defense?

AARON: Well, me and Zbig. Early in the administration Bill Hyland, who now works with Kissinger, and Roger Molander. Cy and Les Gelb, Marshall Shulman. And of course Paul Warnke and Spurgeon Keeny. And of course Harold Brown in Defense.

ALLEN: Who took the lead in this administration in the SALT negotiations? Was this something the NSC oversaw very carefully, or something Harold Brown perhaps...

AARON: I would say it was Paul who was pushing all the time. Paul Warnke--that was his job, what he wanted to do. But we oversaw it because we shared all the communities that did the analysis and discussed the tactics and all the rest. I think you have to say the NSC was the dominant voice in the process.

ALLEN: Did the President get involved in this specific negotiation?

AARON: Oh, yes, very much.

ALLEN: Could you expand on that a little bit? Was this unusual for a President to do or very usual?

AARON: It's hard to say. During the Nixon period, very detailed guidance would come from the President. But I always had the impression that Henry Kissinger talked privately with Nixon, and then came away and wrote his own version of what happened and really got only general guidance from Nixon. In this administration, in fact, there was very specific guidance given by the President.

ALLEN: Do you think this had anything to do with the President's personal background as an engineer so he was not a stranger to military science and weaponry as much as a layman might have been?

AARON: The President is the sort of person who feels uncomfortable deciding general policy without understanding the details.

ALLEN: Did you have instances in which you personally negotiated with the Russians on these, or how was the actual--once you'd made a decision about what the U.S. policy was, what offer you would make, who transmitted it and how?

AARON: I actually negotiated with the Soviets only once on the subject personally, and that was prior to the breakthrough in the fall of '77. I went over and had lunch with the Soviets here, and I just told them, as an old SALT person that they remembered very well, that we weren't going to get an agreement unless they could do something for us on the MIRVing of heavy ICBMs.

ALLEN: Who was it in particular that you were meeting with? Can you say?

AARON: Yes, I met with [Yuli] Vorontsov and [Alexander] Bessmertnykh. Bessmertnykh was their SALT person. I met briefly with [Ambassador Anatoly] Dobrynin but then went on to meet with them. You never know whether your message had effect, but they came back, and they were prepared to do that. I think that was perhaps the most important breakthrough in the negotiations. But they didn't give that in concession to me. They gave it to Paul Warnke later.

ALLEN: You had been involved in SALT negotiations before in a different administration. What was the difference? You had slightly different positions in this administration. What were the other differences?

AARON: The principal difference is that there was no backchannel. In SALT I there was a backchannel from the White House to the Soviets that let them set out the basic limits of what had to be done. And that was very important because the Soviets felt confident that they weren't just being harrassed by petty bureaucratic positions. There was no backchannel in this administration, with the exception of the one time I mentioned. And that was, I think, a disadvantage. I didn't try to negotiate with the Soviets, but I did try to make them know what was important. That wasn't done very often, and therefore negotiations proceeded in a much more awkward fashion.

The other major difference was, of course, later when Kissinger was Secretary of State, he had the flexibility to do whatever he liked. Kissinger sort of dominated the entire policy machinery. Then he started getting very--that's when you got the acrobatics. That's when you got things really kind of hairy, which we ended up having to set aside when we came in because they got so complicated. We had proposals for only so many ships, so many cruise missiles for so many years, even though we weren't going to have any ships. It just got...it was gimmicky.

ALLEN: Meaningless numbers?

AARON: Yes, basically they were meaningless numbers. Now sometimes that's all right, but it tended to undermine the seriousness of the whole enterprise and made it easy for its opponents to attack. Some people think that if we had just picked up where Henry left off, we'd have been much better off. I think we'd have been murdered by the Congress, because there was no military or strategic justification. Many of these had just been picked out of the air in the process of bargaining.

ALLEN: They weren't based on military or Defense Department recommendations at all?

AARON: No.

ALLEN: You just talked about the military basis for the agreements--in this administration were much better than they were in the previous administration--that's one certainly very major difference this time around. Would you see the offers as being much more formal?

AARON: That's right.

ALLEN: And perhaps more confusing to the Russians than a more informal kind of backchannel.

AARON: By the time Kissinger was Secretary of State, he already had established a relationship so that they knew he was really speaking for the President, and he would go off with Brezhnev, and they'd spend all night drinking and talking and so forth, so that you didn't have...you know the Secretary of State was also able to do the kind of informal discussion that took place in the backchannel. So it was all right not to have a backchannel. Because the relationship was [inaudible]. We never got that on any of our levels, so I think it was a mistake.

ALLEN: Why do you think that was so?

AARON: Part of it had to do with the unresolved relationship between the NSC and the State Department.

ALLEN: Neither one would trust the other to have that kind of...

AARON: Well, the State Department essentially did not trust the NSC to conduct any diplomatic or even paradiplomatic activity for fear of losing its bureaucratic turf, and yet they were not really capable of conducting the negotiations at every level. It's only when the two are working together that really does this government work right.

The other major thing I was involved in was with the deployment of the long-range cruise missiles in Europe, which everyone said couldn't be done because we tried in the '50's and in the '60's. They'd been disasters for us, but we did so this time with that same combination of political backchannel quiet discussion and a formal diplomatic process that tied the pieces together once you had the commitments in place. I spent most of 1979 traveling all over Europe visiting the parliamentarians and cabinet ministers and prime ministers getting them lined up for this, and I did so in part because of the neutron bomb episode in which many Europeans no longer--well, they mistrusted the State Department. The State Department said the President of the United States wanted this missile deployed, but they didn't believe them, so it had to be somebody from this office who could speak closer and who could travel without publicity. So it was probably the

most active thing on the diplomatic side. And the State Department was happy to do it partly because the people that worked on this subject were friends, colleagues--people that did not see jealousy in this situation, or at least a minimum of it. And they understood the importance of the different roles that the two organizations could play. But generally speaking, they were very jealous.

ALLEN: Your travel was mostly in Western Europe?

AARON: I also went off to see Mr. [Haile Mariam] Mengistu in Ethiopia during the Ogaden War to warn him not to invade Somalia.

ALLEN: Describe that meeting to me.

AARON: It was something. He works in Haile Selassie's old palace, and it's a kind of down-at-the-heels sort of place [inaudible]. He keeps lions in the yard, and they are actually kept in rooms on the ground floor. Right under his office, the lions are kept, and they are clearly fed during the hours that he receives visitors, because you go in there and you are starting to make your point about, "Mr. Mengistu, I'm telling you if you cross that line, it's the end of you." You'll suddenly hear this roar, and you start looking around your chair to make sure there are no trap doors. It was quite interesting, quite an interesting conversation.

ALLEN: Was he responsive to it?

AARON: Yes, as a matter of fact, he gave us assurances that he was not going to invade Somalia, and then he gave me a long lecture on the history of the Ethiopian revolution. After which I told him we didn't oppose his revolution at all. The only thing we were concerned about was what he was doing with the Soviet Union, and said, "As long as you have the Soviets here and the Cubans here, you will be an enemy not only of ourselves but of all your neighbors, and it will be very difficult for you, and you won't achieve any kind of domestic tranquility as long as you have these people here." Which I think has proven to be the case.

ALLEN: What other meetings stick out in your mind in the last four years, either because of the substance of the meeting or because of the persons involved?

AARON: Early in '77 I was sent to a place called Torquay in England where there was a meeting of the Bilderberg Conference. This is a great cause celebre of the right and the left actually. Both of them think this is a place where statesmen can conspire against the people. In fact, it's your basic boring conference where people get up and talk a lot, but the interesting thing about it is you have very high level people there.

It's something that was quite a favorite of Helmut Schmidt, and we got a call saying, "Schmidt's here, and he's mad at us. [He

thinks] we don't consult with him, and he's going to give us a hard time. You better send somebody over here." So I was dispatched to fly to London and take the train out to this very interesting little town, which is sort of semi-tropical because the Gulf Stream is right up there in this little corner of Devon, which is a very popular little resort.

So I came in and sat down at the table with Schmidt, and he gave me a hard time while we were eating dinner. I was reasonably quiet, and then everybody else had cleared out, knowing we were going to have a private chat, and he kept me there for three and a half hours going through one terrible thing we had done after another. We had only been in power for three or four months, so I didn't believe we had done all these terrible things. Next he took a list out of his pocket, which he went down and crossed out as he went through this. And it was very interesting because the list consisted at least fifty percent of things that didn't have to do with our foreign policy at all. They had to do with our tax policy. They had to do with our economic policy. They had to do with our energy policy. Many of them were things that the President had promised to do during his campaign. And I said, "Well, Mr. Chancellor, I recognize the importance of allied consultation, but you've got to admit it's a little difficult for a candidate for the presidency to consult with you first about the promises he makes during the election." [Schmidt replied] "Well that might be so, but this is...." Anyway, this I remember well. I remember my overwhelming impression being that the Chancellor was bitterly disappointed that he was no longer the leader of the Western world, and, of course, relations have never been quite right between the two--not since, but even before.

ALLEN: Do you think this has a lot to do with his personality rather than specific issues?

AARON: I think it has to do with both. What Joe Alsop once said about Lyndon Johnson can really be said about Schmidt, "The man's too big for the job."

ALLEN: That feisty kind of personality I would think would not particularly rub the President well. The President is no meek, retiring person himself. He certainly speaks right up when he needs to. Do you think for those two personalities the conflict was overplayed by the press, or it was accurate?

AARON: Might even have been underplayed.

ALLEN: Do you have any specific memories of exchanges between them?

AARON: No, in the cases that I saw them operating they were quite polite and civil toward one another. They mainly said bad things about each other to others.

ALLEN: One interesting thing, I think, in this administration in foreign policy has been the role of the Vice President. According to just a layman's perspective such as mine, this Vice President has been much more active in foreign policy and much more important than any other Vice President. Is this true, do you think? And if so, what do you think are the reasons for it?

AARON: I think it's true, and I think the principal reason is that the Vice President came to the office with certain assets which the President, being a big man, basically, was prepared to take advantage of. And they managed to get on with each other in a reasonably good way. The Vice President knew more about a lot of foreign policy issues than the President did, even though he was no expert himself. He knew something about the politics of foreign policy issues, and how they'd balance, and how they'd affect the Senate and so forth, and some of the interest groups that are interested in foreign policy.

So I think all of those things, plus the fact that he turned out to be quite a good diplomat. He was sent off as one of his first jobs to visit the crowned heads of Europe, but also he was sent off to meet with leaders of South Africa. That, I guess I would say, was a meeting that I recall quite vividly. In particular I can recall two aspects of it. One, Mr. [Prime Minister Balthazar] Vorster wanted to meet privately first, and he began right out with when we'd met with his chief of intelligence, and he just started out with "Well, let's get these airplanes started out that we're going to want to buy and look at the spare parts and get that squared away." And the Vice President said, "Well, you've got to understand, this is not business as usual. We're not going to talk one way in public and another way in private. There's just a different relationship, and you need to get used to it." It was stunning. They couldn't believe their ears. The Vice President was very nice, but he was just very formal on the subject of Rhodesia and Namibia and South Africa itself.

Then after a day and a half of talks it began to appear that Vorster was very frustrated by the discussions and made little progress in convincing us that apartheid was a good thing. And he said, "You know, you had your situation with Indians, and what you did with the Indians is no different than what we're doing in our own country." The Vice President said that it was one of the most disgraceful chapters in the history of our country, and he just read them right out as to the genocide, the destruction of a culture. And it was a very, very proud moment, because I think he took what Vorster thought was embarrassment and should be embarrassing to us and demonstrated that in our country we feel very deeply our humanity, even if it's too late, and we weren't about to be put off by arguments.

ALLEN: What other diplomatic missions do you remember off the top of your head was the Vice President involved in?

AARON: Well, he went to China, and that was a very important moment because the President couldn't go. We had normalized relations with them, but normalization wasn't really complete. The Vice President really solidified the relationship and made it normal, if you will, because we went there not to--as the Vice President made it very clear--not to play the China card, not because our policy toward China was some derivative of our policy toward Russia even though for thirty years it had been one thing or the other. Either they were part of the Russian Communist conspiracy, so therefore we couldn't deal with them, or they were a card to play against the Russian Communist conspiracy, so therefore we dealt with them. We never dealt with them as China, a billion people, a massive country with enormous resources, human and material, for whom we ought to have a relationship anyway. And he went there with that message, and instead of starting out his talks with a lot of globaloney about strategic balance and the polar bear and all that stuff, he started right out by telling them, "What are we going to do together? What are we going to do in trade? What are we going to do with commerce? What about culture? How about our students studying together? How about these things?" And it had an enormously positive effect. It just changed their whole attitude. We never got lectured about the polar bear. We never got lectured about the decline of American strength or that kind of stuff. We just talked very seriously about some foreign policy issues. We talked about Russia, not the polar bear. And it paved the way for some really very, very productive relationships. And, of course, the President and Vice President had an opportunity to speak to the Chinese people on television, something that no Westerner has had an opportunity to do before or since.

ALLEN: That was quite a moment. Were you involved in writing his remarks? Helping to prepare him for that?

AARON: Yes, well, it was my suggestion that he do it.

ALLEN: So it was an American suggestion? And did you meet any resistance from the Chinese?

AARON: No, they were quite taken with the idea, actually. We actually did not think we could get it when we started out, but we did.

ALLEN: What was the feedback that you got?

AARON: It was quite good, although interestingly most people in China heard it on the radio because they didn't have very many television sets. But they carried the whole speech on radio live. That was taking quite a chance. We could have, and he did say a lot of very direct things about human rights.

ALLEN: But he managed to do this without rousing the antagonism

of his Chinese hosts?

AARON: That's right. In fact, the food got better as each day went past. That's supposed to be a sure sign that the trip is going well.

ALLEN: Discourage unwelcome visitors with poor food?

AARON: Well, there's a culinary diplomacy that takes place. That was a good trip. I think his trip to Southeast Asia was a very good trip, very tough trip particularly with Marcos, but again I think he paved the way of solving the base negotiations. He always travels with an itinerary of something substantive to accomplish, not just to look around and shake hands. And he's been very successful.

ALLEN: In the Philippines in particular, what do you remember about personal relationships there, the personal chemistry between Marcos and the Vice President? [Interruption] And we just had a visit from Vice President Mondale, who said that he had very good rapport with the Marcoses. Is that true?

AARON: Let me just leave it at that. [Laughter]

ALLEN: Oh, no, you can't say just a little bit more?

AARON: I'll leave it at that.

ALLEN: Are there other things that stick out in your mind?

AARON: Yes, this is something that deserves to be in the archives. There are two stories about the Vice President that I'd like to leave you with. One was on the very first trip, the second to the last stop was in Rome, and we had dinner with the President of Italy. We had it at the Quirinale Palace, which was for centuries the home of the Pope. We were escorted from one room to another with these people in livery opening the doors and opening the doors, and these rooms were full of tapestries and chandeliers and trompe l'oeil paintings and Italian masters and sculpture by Cellini and Michelangelo, and it just went on and on and finally after going through twenty or twenty-five or thirty rooms, we finally arrived at the banquet hall where everything was in white linen and gold service and beautiful crystal chandeliers and had course after course. Then we adjourned to a private study all lined with silks and brocades, and as we left we went through another twenty-five or thirty rooms--totally different ones--and they're opening the doors. Then we get in the car, and I hop in next to the Vice President. We go back to the hotel where we are staying, and just as we drive up to that hotel he says, "Wasn't that really something?" And I said, "Yes, that was really something." He said, "Can you imagine how they must have screwed the people?" It was the perfect populist, honest, human statement,

but totally different than what I would have thought. He went right to the political point that this was, in fact, built on the backs of people.

The other time was when we were going to see Vorster, which was really his first difficult diplomatic assignment. He'd been briefed and briefed and briefed, and we discussed one issue and then another issue, and then he said, "OK, now when we're sitting at the table if I start to get off track, just pass me a note. And if I keep going off track, just feel sorry for your country."

ALLEN: Can I ask you just one more question? You were involved with structuring the NSC during the transition time, setting up committees the way you think things should operate. You've had a special role then in planning the organization of the NSC. Are there particular instances that you can comment about in which this organization has really worked well? You mentioned the mini-SCC saved some of the time of the higher level officials. How else do you think your organization has worked well or poorly? What's your comment on that?

AARON: I think generally speaking it has worked well. I don't think you'll find very many complaints about the formal decision making process. I think if any, the complaints would be on the informal decision process--the breakfast meetings, the way things tend to come out. You'll find in the State Department the theory that they chair all the committees, but the fact of the matter is the CIA and the Defense Department aren't going to let them do that, Treasury and others. So I think that this is about the best balance that you can reach. It's a viable one, and I think the system has worked quite well in most instances. There is a tendency to ascribe a certain amount of responsibility to the system that belongs to the substantive decisions or the inability or unwillingness of all the players to pull together in a crisis like Iran or something like that. But there's no lack of systematic work, no lack of systematic analysis. If the players only use the system! Usually in the worst examples you look at where there were failures--where things just didn't work out right--you'll find that there was an unwillingness to use the system or an inability to use it.

[Interruption]

ALLEN: You've got to go. Thank you.

AARON: I'd be happy to talk to you some more some other time, but...

ALLEN [obviously later]: I want to make an addition. I asked Mr. Aaron how we could get his address five years from now, and he said that he kept up with the Woodrow Wilson School of Princeton, and he also generally kept his address with the State Department Credit Union. So there are two sources.