

Hyman G. Rickover Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 8/17/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Hyman G. Rickover
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Biographical Note

Hyman G. Rickover (1900-1986) was an Admiral in the United States Navy, Chief of the Bureau for Nuclear Propulsion from 1947 to 1981, and Chief of the Naval Reactors Branch of the Atomic Energy Commission from 1953 to 1981. This interview focuses on meetings at the White House about establishing a multilateral force, John F. Kennedy's concern about education, and the internal operations of the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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By Vice Admiral H. G. Rickover, U. S. Navy

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH VICE ADMIRAL H. G. RICKOVER, USN

August 17, 1964

MR. SCHLESINGER: Admiral, when did you first meet John F. Kennedy?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: I first met him when he was a Senator. I was testifying before the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee which was established subsequent to Sputnik. Senator Kennedy attended two meetings at which I was asked to discuss preparedness matters with the Committee.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Was this on education?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: No, this was on the preparedness posture of the United States and on what should be done to improve this posture.

MR. SCHLESINGER: This was 1957?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: No, 1958. I also met Senator Kennedy when I testified on space matters at the time the present NASA organization was being considered by Congress. After he became President he sent for me in February 1963 to discuss the proposal for a multilateral POLARIS force. I was with him for about forty minutes. We were alone. I also met him at two parties where we briefly discussed education. During my interview with him at the White House, in addition to the multilateral POLARIS force, we discussed education and how he and I were brought up as boys.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Oh, really.

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Before the presidency you had seen him in these Congressional hearings?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes.

MR. SCHLESINGER: You had no particular impression of him at that time?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: As a matter of fact, no. He was an attractive man. That is all I can say. He asked intelligent questions.

MR. SCHLESINGER: How did you happen to be called in, do you suppose, with regard to the multilateral forces?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: There were wide differences of opinion at that time among the Atomic Energy Commission, the Defense, State and Navy Departments. Various staff members of these organizations had worked extensively on this matter. I do not know who arranged for the meeting.

MR. SCHLESINGER: The President was interested in your view of the technical feasibility of the MLF?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes, he was interested in my technical and personal views. There had been a number of attempts--going back to 1957--to give nuclear submarine information away to foreign countries, notably to the British, the French, the Dutch and the Italians. The British had given us assistance with the atom bomb development during the war and so had a special status. After Congress had given its consent--as required by law--we made an agreement with the British to give them nuclear submarine information. All this was in the past. The question now was whether other nations should be given this information. Steps were underway in the lower echelons of the executive branches of government to commit us to a multinational (NATO) nuclear submarine force. It was about this the President asked my opinion.

I submitted a number of reasons why it seemed to me preferable to limit multinational crews to surface ships. I went into considerable technical detail why I believed it inadvisable to try out the multinational idea on so complex a ship as an atomic submarine, which can be safely entrusted only to highly intelligent and specially trained officers and men, working in close harmony with one another. Differences in training and language were bound to cause many difficulties and to lower the effectiveness

and safety of these ships.

I raised the question of leakage of information to the Russians. With our nuclear submarines manned by a multinational crew this would be inevitable. We would lose an important advantage we now possessed. I felt that this advantage should not be lightly given up. One needed only to think of the large segment of our economy which would be vulnerable to attack by Russian nuclear submarines. I said that people who were willing to take a chance on the leakage of this information probably did not realize how much time, effort and money we had put into developing a nuclear submarine fleet that operated reliably. Foreign countries naturally wanted to spare themselves this effort; this is why they were continually and persistently pressing us to give them our nuclear submarine know-how. What benefit would we derive from giving this information away?

The President apparently agreed because two days later I received a memorandum from the Navy Department which stated that on February 11, which was the date on which I was called to the White House, a meeting was held with the National Security Council, and that General Taylor had reported the results of the meeting as follows:

(a) The President said Admiral Rickover had convinced him the multinational manning of POLARIS should be on surface ships and not on submarines because of simplicity, the time element, security issues, possible difficulty of obtaining Congressional approval.

(b) General Taylor said that Mr. McNamara is now in favor of a MLF for surface ships.

(c) Department of Defense is getting up a paper showing the issue pro and con for surface ships and submarines.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Did the President disclose his own attitude toward MLF?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: The President did tell me of the importance of having a MLF group in NATO in order to keep NATO alive--to keep the alliance from breaking up.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Was he concerned about the mixed manning problem particularly, that is, about getting people of various nationalities to work together?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: The mixed manning in nuclear submarines was one of the issues I discussed with him but I don't think it was the major issue. I told him that if we absolutely had to make it work we could make it work. I believe the primary reason for his decision was that we would be giving away information about our nuclear submarines which inevitably would leak to the Russians, long before they could develop it themselves. Since our POLARIS system was probably the best deterrent we now had and would continue so into the 1980's it was foolhardy to jeopardize it. This was uppermost in my own mind and, I believe in the President's as well. I also pointed out that it is not necessary for members of an alliance to know the details of each other's military secrets. There had been many previous alliances whose members did not give away their military secrets to each other. In fact, the existence of an alliance had never been a convincing argument for inducing a nation with superior weapons to share with allies the secret of their design or manufacture. I said that I could not agree with the novel concept urged by proponents of MLF that entry into an alliance requires disclosure of all military secrets.

I must say that this concept of disclosure seems to have many adherents, for efforts are regularly being made to give away our nuclear submarine know-how. Fortunately these have so far been checkmated by Congress, but at times it has been touch and go. Congress has shown great wisdom in recognizing that the risk of leakage to the enemy far outweighs any potential gains for the NATO alliance.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Do you have any impression where the support was coming from for the submarine MLF?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes, it was coming from the State Department primarily, but with assistance from the Defense Department. Possibly there were people in these two Departments who were concerned about the gold drain and therefore wished to sell submarines and POLARIS missiles to foreign countries. Also there were those who were ideologically committed to a single political union, or something of the sort. In my

opinion these people were not sufficiently knowledgeable technically to understand the value of this information, the strenuous efforts being made by foreign nations to obtain it, or how quickly it would leak to the Russians and jeopardize our national strength.

These recurrent attempts to give away our nuclear submarine know-how are a great worry to me. Having been involved with the atomic submarine from the start, it might be thought I would be proud to see it copied by others. I am indeed happy when the civilian Shippingport atomic power plant is being copied here and abroad. As you know, I am in charge of this project--the first plant built anywhere in the world, devoted exclusively to production of electricity from atomic power. But it is a civilian project. In military matters I firmly believe in secrecy.

MR. SCHLESINGER: The President at this period himself had doubts as to whether the MLF concept was the best way to approach that. He did not get into that?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: He did not discuss that with me. Naturally, his time was limited; what he chiefly wanted was my technical viewpoint. I am sure he had obtained the views of others on this issue. May I say here that it was the first time a President had asked me to express my views on the technical aspects of nuclear ship propulsion or the nuclear navy. It was gratifying to find him fully aware of my work and genuinely interested in what I had to say. The difference in our respective positions somehow never intruded into the free give and take of our conversation.

MR. SCHLESINGER: I think President Kennedy had not only a natural courtesy in his dealings with people but also an instinctive respect for knowledge.

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes, but it was something that goes deeper than outward courtesy. I think a man who tries to get something done is less interested in the forms of courtesy than in respect for his professional judgment and an understanding of the problems that make it difficult for him to attain his objective. What one hopes for is that his superior will listen to him with an open mind. As far as I was concerned, the President

could have been brusque, even rude, and I should still have appreciated his readiness to be intelligently concerned with my problems. But, of course, the President was most courteous besides being willing to let me talk in a free and natural manner. He had the gift to make one feel equal without thereby diminishing the dignity of his high office.

MR. SCHLESINGER: On the MLF, did he make any remarks about the European situation or about our NATO allies?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes. One of the main points he made was the necessity of not proliferating atomic weapons. I believe he knew we must keep the alliance going, yet not increase the number of nations possessing atomic weapons. He was trying to accomplish that.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Did he tell you anything about de Gaulle?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: No.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Or anything in particular about the German situation?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: No.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Anything else occur to you about this MLF issue? Does that recur in your later conversations?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: No, because that issue was decided that very day. He was apparently ready to make up his mind and right after he talked to me he did make up his mind. Ed Murrow, at that time head of U.S.I.A., was present at a meeting with the President that afternoon and he told me that....

MR. SCHLESINGER: You mean the Security Council meeting?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: The Security Council meeting. He called me and told me that the President had said he agreed with me and had now made up his mind to do it in the manner I had suggested to him.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Is Ed Murrow an old friend of yours?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Oh, yes. I was on his program on three or four occasions when he

was active in TV. Also we have met occasionally and discussed matters of common interest.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Did anything else come up in the meeting besides the MLF and education?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: And how he and I were brought up?

MR. SCHLESINGER: How did the question of your childhood happen to come up?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: We discussed and agreed on the great importance of education for the present and future welfare of our country. He, of course, was quite familiar with the fact that many children are not getting an adequate education; he was especially interested in what could be done for underprivileged youth. He told me of some of the plans he was backing. We then got into a discussion of the ability of children to acquire a good education. I told him I thought a great deal depended on motivation, home background, influence of the church, etc., and we could not expect the school to do the job all by itself. I asked him what influence his parents had had on him. He said they had been quite strict with him and he had to work and study hard during his boyhood--the fact that his parents were wealthy had made no difference. Then he asked me about my boyhood and I told him that although the wealth was lacking I also had to work hard. We agreed that working hard and having goals early in life greatly spurred the subsequent development of character and of the mind.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Did he talk particularly about one parent or the other?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: No, he simply mentioned his parents. This is not a subject one would press; I merely followed the President's lead. It was extraordinarily easy to talk to him. He put one at ease.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Yes, I think what you say is absolutely right. The capacity to put people at ease and conduce relaxed moods is one of his great....

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: The President gave you the feeling that he considered you as competent in your particular field as he was in his own. This was entirely sincere; it was

inherent in the man and not put on as a matter of form.

MR. SCHLESINGER: When you talked about education did you get much into the problem of curriculum?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Not too much. To my surprise, the President had read two of my books so he knew my views on the subject. I talked to him chiefly about my idea that we ought to have a national education standard--permissive, of course, but important as a yardstick by which parents and local communities could measure the performance of their schools. He was interested in the idea and said he would look into it. He did so at once, calling the Commissioner of Education as soon as I left, and asking him to get into the matter. Through his Naval Aide, the President later sent me copies of letters on the subject which he called "Progress Reports for Admiral Rickover." This, of course, was also quite gratifying. I am convinced that had he lived something would have been done in this matter.

MR. SCHLESINGER: These were letters from Commissioner Keppel?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Do you recall anything else the President said of interest to education?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: I cannot recall his exact words, but I assure you that it was evident from the tenor of the conversation that he was as convinced as I am of the great importance of education to the United States. Not merely conversationally, but with deep conviction he said he wished to do everything he could to improve American education and to help underprivileged children. I suppose a number of the steps now being taken in this connection had their genesis in his attitude and in his actions.

MR. SCHLESINGER: That is right. You then had other conversations with the President on education in addition to this White House meeting?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes. I met the President at a White House reception and we again

discussed education for a few moments. I told him that it was extremely difficult for anyone in government to get a big new task accomplished if he did not have the backing of responsible officials. Without such backing, he could expend his life in fruitless efforts. I knew that if the President supported the proposal for a national education standard we would probably obtain it. He agreed with me, but pleaded the vast amount of work, the many things he had to do. As I mentioned, he did submit progress reports which indicated his definite interest in following this up so it must have been one of the things, beside the immediate critical items which come to the President's attention, in which he was genuinely interested.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Did you have any direct contact with Commissioner Keppel?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Only a telephone call from him telling me of the President's interest in a national standard, on the same day I spoke with the President at the White House. Two months ago I met Mr. Keppel at a party and he assured me the project was still active. But I fear it will not be pushed, now that President Kennedy is no longer here to give it his backing.

MR. SCHLESINGER: You have served in several administrations, was there any difference about the Kennedy administration in the atmosphere of government or anything like that, that seems worthy of comment?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Well, I think politically it was as active as any administration I have seen. The President was a competent politician. As with anyone else, 99.99 per cent of his time was filled with chores that have to be done, but I think he took time to read and to think; he had an ideal he wanted to advance besides tending to his routine duties. I think he resembled Melbourne in this. He fully understood the practical needs of political life, yet he did not allow himself to be bogged down entirely in the details of day-to-day government. An important thing he did was to create the impression that he was accessible. This is difficult for a man in his position.

I remember an episode in the life of Emperor Hadrian which seems to me apropos: A woman approached him to complain about an injustice allegedly done to her. The Emperor didn't give her time to explain herself fully. He was pressed by more important matters. But when she told him that a ruler who will not listen to his people is not a true ruler, the Emperor realized she was right. Still there was so much he had to do that he felt he could not stop and listen to everyone with a problem. He concluded that the best he could do was to look for competent people, or for men who could be trained to competence, and then share with them the great burden of his office. I am sure President Kennedy felt the same way. He respected competence and made use of it.

MR. SCHLESINGER: I think that was so and I think he had an immense effect in giving the Executive Establishment the sense that if they had an idea they could find an outlet for it in the White House.

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: I would judge he was the most accessible President in recent years. I remember several years ago Queen Frederika visited the United States and I was escorting her through the Shippingport atomic power plant. She asked me if the President ever discussed atomic matters with me, and I told her no. She was quite shocked that the President had never asked the person responsible for nuclear propulsion about what was going on. She said that in her own country her husband, King Paul, was accessible at all times to Greek citizens. This, of course, is a great difficulty in a country with a population of nearly two hundred million. The President cannot literally and physically be accessible to everyone.

MR. SCHLESINGER: But when President Kennedy wanted to find out about something he wanted to talk to the person who knew and not have it filter through....

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes, and this is what is so rare. The President was more accessible than the heads of some departments of the Executive Branch. Few are as willing as he was to listen to and respect the technical judgment of subordinates in the fields of

their special competence. It is otherwise with Congress. Members of both Houses are receptive to frank statements of fact and opinion when they ask anyone to testify.

When you work under the direction of powerful men who have the authority to help or to hinder, or to demolish your labors, you are naturally grateful to those who make themselves accessible when you need help; who take into consideration your "professional" judgment when they must render technical decisions in your sphere of responsibility and competence. It has always seemed extremely odd to me that the good effect such helpful concern is bound to have on morale, hence on achievement is so much better understood by elected than by appointed officials. Senators and Congressmen are always available to talk to people, many administrators are not. Perhaps the reason is that members of Congress are politicians and therefore know how to judge people. They are apt to concentrate on evaluating a man and, if they trust him, not to worry too much about the details of the projects he heads. Despite the fact that "leadership" and "pure" administrative skill are supposedly the prerequisites of administrators, they usually lack the elected official's talent with people. Administrators seem to value rules more than persons, status more than competence. They run a pretty tidy organization where the lines of authority are firmly drawn; where decisions tend to be made on the strength of authority rather than expertise.

MR. SCHLESINGER: I think the lines of authority are the nuisance of the hierarchy through which everything moves with the greatest of....

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: The man at the top then becomes completely insulated, particularly if he believes implicitly in the rules laid down by the American Management Association that you should never have more than five to seven subordinates. Pretty soon you limit yourself to contacts with these few people. I question whether you can run any organization effectively that way.

MR. SCHLESINGER: He becomes a prisoner of his own system.

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes, and his subordinates naturally try to find favor in his eyes

and so they keep on telling him what he likes to hear, whereas the opposite should be true of anyone in a high position. He should not be concerned with the things that are going well. He should be concerned with problems--with things that are going badly. But, unless he makes this clear, subordinates are not going to disturb him with troublesome matters.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Another thing about Kennedy I think was his real commitment to the idea of excellence.

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: Yes, he valued competence in others, I think for the reason that he was himself an excellent human being. He was a politician in the best sense of the term.

MR. SCHLESINGER: Where did you hear the news of his death?

ADMIRAL RICKOVER: I was here in my office. I found it unbelievable. It was a great personal shock.