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Interview with Myer 'Mike' Feldman by Avner Cohen

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Summary:

Transcript of interview by Avner Cohen with senior Kennedy advisor Myer "Mike" Feldman. Myer Feldman, close aide to JFK and special liason to Israel, discusses the negotiations between the US and Israel regarding the Non-Proliferation treaty in this 1994 interview.

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Dr. Avner Cohen Interview with Mike (Myer) Feldman 10 January 1994, Washington D.C.[1]

Dr. Avner Cohen: What is a nuance that you would like to bring to light?[2]

Mike Feldman: Well, what I started to say was just that, that in all of my discussions with BG [David Ben-Gurion][3] and with Golda,[4] I got to know Golda very well, BG not quite as well, but in all of those discussions, I found that the one who was pushing the hardest for a nuclear capacity, pushing the hardest for complete security for Israel, [was Golda]. She never believed Israel could be secure unless it was independently secure, didn't have to rely on the United States or anybody else. So with that philosophy, she was the one who felt that this was security for Israel. That doesn't come through here. BG was the one who enunciated it. In fact, I told you and you say in here that in our meeting at the Waldorf Astoria, this was handled as a peripheral matter, it wasn't an important matter. I think one of the reasons is that Golda wasn't there. So, anyhow, that nuance—everything you say here is accurate and justified, and I think it's a good exposition. What I don't feel is her participation.

Cohen: Well, because the Israeli sources that I talked to . . .

Feldman: Well, you used Ben-Gurion's book . . .

Cohen: His biographer . . .

Feldman: And you used the letters between the prime minister and the president, and you used sources which necessarily are between Ben-Gurion and Kennedy and Ben-Gurion and Johnson. Though, not so much BG and Johnson.

Cohen: Eshkol[5] and Johnson.

Feldman: And I think that's the way the record, that's what the record reflects because that's the way the communications . . .

Cohen: But the record also reflects that in '59-'60, Eshkol and Golda were hesitant. You know, Golda could not stand Shimon Peres.[6] He was young, he was pushy . . .

Feldman: I know that . . . a lot of people couldn't stand him. She wasn't the only one. He's become a statesman recently.

Cohen: That's right. But part of the way that she looked at the project was, "this was his baby, and I'm suspicious of him; therefore, I'm suspicious of his project." Now at one point the French, de Gaulle,[7] stopped that, and Shimon was trying to save it, and apparently at that time she and Sapir[8] were ready to suspend it. Because in the written material she doesn't appear . . . I mean Shimon is pushing all over, and doing all kind of manipulations to save it. To initiate it, and later to save it. Golda is much more cautious. That's the reason why I never took her at that point as a critical player.

Feldman: I'm talking about a little bit later period of time. I'm talking beginning of '62, when Golda really became almost paranoid about Israel's security.

Cohen: Now, you don't recall what time it was . . . where the number two came from?

Feldman: Oh, it was after I left, I think it was after I left the White House, I think it was '65, '66, '67 . . .

Cohen: You left the White House in . . .

Feldman: 1965, yeah so it was around that time.

Cohen: It should be a little after, because in '66 they had the first one.[9]

Feldman: Yeah, '67 maybe, around that time. I can't tell you the exact year. It was after I left the White House and I left the White House in '65.

[Discussion of source excised]

Feldman: I knew everybody, I think, involved in the hierarchy of Israeli politics. And so, I got a lot of information that nobody else got. Always.

Cohen: Because what Sapir says, and that's the reason I was very glad to use . . .

Feldman: Why can't you use [excised] as a source?

Cohen: [Excised] I wanted to ask you—you were not in the White House but maybe you know something about it—apparently Johnson for the first time that he got confirmation [that Israel possessed the bomb] was in '68. Not in '67, but in '68.

Feldman: I was in contact with Johnson at that time.

Cohen: Now the story, and the story appears in many places including in official documents, is that the head of the CIA, Richard Helms,[10] came to him, and gave it to him, I think it was early '68, and the immediate response of Johnson was, "Keep it tight, secret, don't tell to anybody, not to Rusk[11] or McNamara." [12]

Feldman: I knew that too (repeats 3 times).[Discussion of source excised]

Cohen: Right. Now by late '68, Dean Rusk is still pushing very hard. Even though the president is not backing him, the president took it as fait accompli, he and, there was another lawyer in town, Paul Warnke.[13]

Feldman: Paul's also a good friend.

Cohen: Now Paul and Dean Rusk are pushing on the NPT [The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons],[14] and there was this confrontation with Yitzhak Rabin,[15] the ambassador at the time. Now what's interesting is that the president, a few months before that, he knows about it. He told Eshkol in early '68 that it would be okay with the [F-4] Phantoms.[16] By late '68, he actually approved the sale, and he left the details for Rusk and Warnke, and yet Rusk is pushing on the F-4, in other words, they never got the message from the White House, let's drop it because they already have it. And they're pushing and pushing, how do you read that?

Feldman: I don't think that's a big problem. Dean Rusk, although a friend, was not a great secretary of state. When I was with Kennedy, Dean Rusk was out of the loop most of the time insofar as these matters were concerned, it was handled not by the State Department, but by me and the Security Council. Now some of that carried over in to the Johnson administration, although Johnson got the feeling that even though he didn't keep much of the Kennedy group, I think I was the last person to leave, as the cartoon on the wall shows, but he got the feeling that Dean Rusk was kind of a

lightweight, and I think that Johnson kept Rusk out of a lot of things that Dean Rusk should have known. During the Kennedy days, Dean called Kennedy one day, and said to him, "If Mike Feldman is running our Middle East foreign policy, I'd better resign." And that carried over a little bit to Johnson, because Johnson had more confidence in Harry McPherson,[17] Bill Moyers,[18] people who were close to him, even Bundy,[19] although there was a little bit of distance between Mac [Bundy] and him.

Cohen: Walt Rostow . . .

Feldman: So I think a little bit of that is what made Johnson . . . Johnson always used to say he liked to play things close to the vest, except with the people who were really close to him, like Jack Valenti,[20] and Bill Moyers, and Harry McPherson, and Wally Jenkins.

Cohen: What about Walt Rostow?

Feldman: No. No, Walt Rostow was kind of in-between; he wasn't one of the close Johnson intimates. Cliff Carter[21] was, [but] Cliff didn't get involved in this. But the people I just mentioned were the people that really were close to, and on whom he would rely for advice. He didn't like to read long memos, in fact any time he'd get a long memo, he'd say, "Get me a short memo." He wanted to talk to people he relied on. And I think that's part of his feeling about Rusk.

Cohen: So Rusk was pushing for the NPT without presidential backing. Yet the Israelis were very much concerned because he was pushing them very hard. In fact they were saying that it may come . . . there was a sense that, in October [and] November just weeks before the election, there was a sense that the whole issue was going to come to a confrontation and they were very deeply concerned.

Feldman: Well, you know, that . . . started a long time before that.

Cohen: Right, but they thought that right now, he is pushing to the limit.

Feldman: I always felt that pressure when I was in the White House from State Department and from the Bundy group, Komer[22] in particular.

Cohen: He was . . .

Feldman: He was an Arab.[23]

[Laughter]

Feldman: He really was. You know, a Jew who . . . I never could stand him. And I think he reciprocated the feeling.

Cohen: Yes, that's . . . yeah.

Feldman: Oh, you have talked to Komer?

Cohen: Yes, indeed.

Feldman: He resented my running foreign policy for the White House.

Cohen: You can see it in the documents. It appears in the documents, it's not only oral, it's in the documents.

Feldman: He's writing a book now. He's in very poor health.

Cohen: That's right. What about your book?

Feldman: I have all kinds of offers. I have fantastic offers to do a book. And at one time I wrote, maybe 1000 pages, on Israeli policy during the time I was in the White House and shortly thereafter. Because I still stayed close to it after I left the White House through the Johnson years. And I showed it to Sy Kenan, and Sy liked it and said why don't you publish it? But it needed so much work I thought, and it had so many things that were private, that I still have it. But I do have terrific offers. In Schlesinger's book you see he says he's not going to treat Israel problems . . .

Cohen: That's what he says. He leaves it to you.

[Laughter]

Cohen: So what's going to happen with these 1000 pages?

Feldman: Ah, it's for my estate I guess.

Cohen: Are there any pages that relate to my topic?

Feldman: Yeah. Well I think the possession of a nuclear weapon by Israel has great historical significance. It not only was important in that day in shaping American foreign policy, but it has lessons, I think, that can be learned by today's foreign policymakers.

Cohen: What do you write?

Feldman: I think, for instance, the White House today is screwing up badly the North Korean situation.

Cohen: It's terrible. Terrible.

Feldman: I don't think they have a strong person in the White House who can say, as Kennedy did... Kennedy listened to the alternative. He listened to Komer, we would meet at night and he'd listen to Komer, Bundy, and me, and occasionally he'd get something from the State Department, a memo from them usually, he'd listen to them and then he'd make a decision. But we had a clear line of what we should do. And that's not true today. I think insofar as the end power possession of nuclear weapons is concerned, you need a strong leader. You need somebody who can put a lot of pressure on the right people, you need somebody who understands, there's a great difference between North Korea and Israel, you know, an antagonist versus a friend, and you have to make that distinction. There's a difference between the responsibility of a nut who runs North Korea and an Israeli government. But you have to consider all of these factors. You have to consider Iran and Iraq. We don't have anybody, I don't think, today that does that.

Cohen: Or it's handled by the State Department, not the White House right now.

Feldman: That's the whole point. [Discussion of source excised]

Cohen: You think you'd allow me to read some of your pages on that?

Feldman: No, not until it's published. But I'm going to do it someday. I'm trying to get my things in such a shape that I can take six months off and do some writing. I haven't been able to do that since I went into practice. But it'll come. Everybody is urging me to do it. I even have an editor, Jackie Onassis wants me to do it. She has given me permission to use some private material that nobody's ever seen that was John Kennedy's in connection with my book, and she wants to be the editor.

Cohen: I read a story around that there was some security pledge that you gave orally to Israeli leaders, that had to do with the sixth fleet. Do you recall that?

Feldman: Yes I do. I can't tell you what it was. McNamara knows, ask McNamara.

Cohen: When was it?

Feldman: He talked about it very recently.

Cohen: I think he did.

Feldman: Maybe he'll do it in his book, I don't know.

Cohen: When was it?

Feldman: It was on a Sunday morning. He and I and the president met, we decided that I would be the right person to talk, but I can't tell you what it was.

Cohen: What year was this?

Feldman: It was right after we had the problem in Lebanon. What year was that? We had a problem in Lebanon, we had a crisis, whatever year that was.

Cohen: '62 maybe. And this was in response to . . .

Feldman: The need of Israel for reassurance. They've always needed assurance.

Cohen: So you flew there . . .

Feldman: I can't tell you any more than that.

Cohen: It's all history, it's only history. You feel today it's harmful to . . .

Feldman: Well, I just can't. It is part of history. I don't know when it can be revealed. One of the reasons I haven't done my oral history for the LBJ library is because there were too many things I didn't want to tell them.

Cohen: But what's interesting is that you knew about this business of the "two" before Johnson actually got it from his sources, from Dick Helms or anybody else. Because you used the word "we." And I think that, I'm not sure if it's accurate to say that, I'm telling in fact what you told [unintelligible] because I have the transcript of

the interview. And you said . . .

Feldman: I thought what I read there was accurate.

Cohen: I'll tell you what you said to us here because this was recorded.

Feldman: You don't attribute this to anybody do you?

Cohen: I do.

Feldman: Oh, the footnote.

Cohen: This is what it says.[Feldman silently reads a passage from the interview transcript Avner made in 1992, with the reference that Israel had 2 nuclear bombs]

Cohen: So when was it?

Feldman: I have to think about it. After I left the White House.

Cohen: And then I said, "What can you do with two bombs?"

Feldman: Yeah.

Cohen: Who did you say it to, do you recall?

Feldman: Yeah I do, but I don't want to say.

[Excised]

Cohen: This was just before the war. He was here?

Feldman: Mmhm.

Cohen: Because, you know, he ran the whole thing until he left office. On the Israeli side, was there anything that you . . . you know I interviewed at length with a man you may know, Zevi Dinstein.[24]

Feldman: Oh sure, Zevi is a good friend, yeah he's still alive I hear. If you see him, give him my best.

[Personal conversation excised]

Feldman: What other comments did I have here?

Cohen: Yes, I'm very curious. Especially in reference to you.

Feldman: Well, I didn't have any problems; I thought all of those were alright. When I started reading on pages 44, 47, some of these things that you say Kennedy wrote, I don't know how much you get into the staff operations of the White House, but I can detect which letters were drafted by Bob Komer, which letters were drafted by me, and that's why you find differences sometimes in what they say. Now Komer drafted

the communications that really upset the Israelis and treated them as a second rate power. That's the way he approached it. I don't know whether you want to get into that, perhaps not, but remember the White House staff influences what the president does.

Cohen: Because he [Komer] was trying to be equal to the Arabs? I mean kind of . . .

Feldman: That's what he says.

Cohen: Self-hating Jew?

Feldman: What he says is that Feldman was partial to Israel and I was the only one who was impartial, neutral. I'll tell you a story, when I . . . I really didn't know much about Israel when I went into the [Kennedy's presidential] campaign, I started to learn about it during the campaign for the presidency, but after the campaign, when Sorenson[25] and I told Kennedy that he was president by calling him Mr. President—he had gone to sleep before he knew he was the president—he asked what we wanted to do and we told him and we were appointed, he then said to me, he said as an extra duty, I'd like you to be in charge of Middle East policy. And nobody knows this. And I said well, you know, I have an emotional attachment to Israel, you're not going to get an unbiased opinion. Even Bobby[26] didn't know about this conversation, because later on, he indicated that he didn't. And Kennedy said, that's exactly why I want you to see all the cables that deal with Israel and keep me advised about Israel, outside the Security Council and outside the State Department. And I said well, I will give you my reaction, but when you read my reaction, you have to read it as somebody who is biased in favor of Israel. And he said that's exactly what I want, and he went on to say that he wants an Irishman to handle Ireland, and so on. So with that charter, I felt perfectly comfortable telling Kennedy what I felt, and I wasn't unbiased, I admit that. But I didn't see anything wrong with it if the president asked me to do that, he understands where I'm coming from. So my comment was, you have to bear that in mind. Page 49, let's see. There I said that BG was excited, but Golda was more concerned I think about the Arab threat than BG was. She always was, even when she was prime minister, the Arab threat was a motivating factor. I think during her entire time.

Cohen: I have a question about that.

Feldman: Page 50, let me tell you there. You say that . . . you say something about the Russian . . . let's see. [Mutters a passage]. Oh yeah, Ben-Gurion asked for a joint declaration from Israel—I meant from the United States and Russia to protect them, and it was rejected. The reason it was rejected was not because Kennedy didn't think it might not be a good idea, in fact I think he felt it was a good idea; that was an important exchange of correspondence. But he said, "There's no way we can go for this, the Russians will never do it and we'll look very foolish if we try to get it done." First we're going to lose, which reduces our prestige, and secondly if we don't get it done we become a weaker power. So I have to respond in this way. That doesn't come through there.

Cohen: I'll emphasize it. I'll tell it from an Israeli source. Even Ben-Gurion's biographer believed in those months, the months before he resigned, Ben-Gurion was slightly out of his mind. Golda said we knew about the letters that he sent to everybody. [She said,] "We felt embarrassed, and we didn't understand why he was doing this, but we didn't want to say anything to the leader." He sent those panicky letters to many leaders, especially Kennedy and de Gaulle, and there was no need for that. He was so obsessed with this security guarantee and fears. Golda said that they didn't understand why he was doing all that.

Feldman: It couldn't be done, it just couldn't be done, there's just no way.

Cohen: What about page 47?

[They find a passage in the document]

Feldman: I don't know whether you discuss the Waldorf Astoria meeting there. Now, before we went into the meeting, I think only Kennedy and I and the ambassador and BG was there, just the four of us. But before we went in, we did raise [the question of whether we should discuss the nuclear program]; the president did say to me, "Should we raise the issue of . . . the nuclear weapons in Israel?" And I said "Well, it's not on the front burner, I don't think it needs to be treated." And he said, "Well, if we don't do it, it downgrades the issue." So he did it deliberately. It wasn't as if, so he knew what he was doing, it wasn't as if it just didn't come up, and the impression that you get here is that it just didn't come up. It was deliberately not raised at the meeting. We did have, I think he did say something, one sentence or so . . .

Cohen: But this was after the visit by Wigner[27] and Rabi,[28] who said it's all right.

Feldman: Yeah, but you know when they say it's all right, everybody. I remember when Dean Rusk, no, not Dean Rusk, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson. He said to me early, right after I got into the White House, "You know, you're going to get a lot of memoranda, and the one thing I've always remembered in my public career is that you read the memorandum with an understanding of the source, and only if you realize the point of view of the person writing the memorandum can you get anything out of it." And he went on to say that "every memorandum justifies the writer and justifies his beliefs," and that's what I felt when I saw their report. And so I don't think that that was a persuasive document.

Cohen: Because they were not just government scientists, I mean they were big scientists, big names, two Jews . . .

Feldman: Yeah, but they're Jewish, and all Jews have an affinity for Israel. Well, most Jews, not Komer.

Cohen: But Kennedy selected them personally?

Feldman: No, he did select them personally, but only after considering who might be acceptable to Israel, and would give the color of virtue to it.

Cohen: Because the teams later on were just government bureaucrats, government scientists.

Feldman: No, but this was more important, much more important.

Cohen: That's right, this was very much people who Israel would be comfortable with. So you were involved with drawing the list of possible scientists?

Feldman: Yes.

Cohen: Okay.

Feldman: And then on page 49, let's see what I . . . oh, this is just the point I've made throughout here, that I don't think you can consider Ben-Gurion alone, you have to

consider Ben-Gurion with a foreign minister. Sure, the communications are always with Ben-Gurion, but he was led, he was a strong figure, but he was led on some of these issues by Golda, at least I felt that way. I remember on a different issue I went over there to see if I could solve what was then called the “refugee issue,” now it’s called the “Palestinian issue.”

Cohen: Right, the Johnson plan.[29]

Feldman: Yeah, and Ben-Gurion and Golda met with me over the course of a week every day. And I found that . . .

Cohen: With the ambassador or without the ambassador?

Feldman: Just the three of us.

Cohen: Who was the ambassador? Barbour? [30] Ogden Reid? [31]

Feldman: Talbot,[32] I think. Maybe it was Barbour? I think Talbot was the ambassador, wasn’t he? I dealt with Talbot, I know. It wasn’t Ogden Reid. That I know. Maybe Barbour.

Cohen: I think Barbour, I’m almost sure.

Feldman: Yes, Talbot was the assistant secretary. Barbour, okay. But I remember at those meetings, BG wasn’t really difficult. Golda was the one who was leading more of the discussions, was stronger. She was the stronger person, if I could get her agreement, I got BG’s. And I felt a lot of the time on a lot of issues, you get Golda, you have BG.

Cohen: There’s something that’s a little anecdote, but I think it’s historically interesting. And it relates to Peres, who now claims something which, and he refers to your name, and I wonder your version. He said the following: In April ’63, he was here, and he said he was in your room, and then the president called and said that perhaps he could see him for a second, and they talk for about ten or fifteen minutes. This is in the biography of Peres by Matti Golan,[33] because he mentioned your name. And he said that Kennedy began to ask him questions about Dimona, he also told me that, in a personal interview, he said he didn’t know what to say, and he said I can assure you Mr. President, we’re not going to be the first to use it. Do you recall that?

Feldman: Yes I do, that’s a true story. But I mean that’s not an uncommon statement.

Cohen: Yes, I know, but it’s interesting because later on, when he was in opposition, Levi Eshkol and Yaakov Herzog[34] took it to be the big formula—Israel is not going to be the first to introduce nuclear weapons. This was in ’64. According to Peres, he was just improvising, he didn’t know what to say and he didn’t want to lie, so he was looking to say something.

Feldman: I thought it was very good.

Cohen: In ’66, when Peres is with BG in the opposition, and they’re fighting Eshkol, and Eshkol repeats this formula, Peres, from the bench of the opposition in the Knesset, said, “Eshkol, why do you have to tell it to the Arabs? Don’t assure them you’re not going to be the first, let them guess, don’t tell them anything.” As if Eshkol

is wrong. And now, historically, he's claiming to be the father of that formula. But historically everybody thinks that Eshkol, with the advice of Yaakov Herzog, he was the one who made it to be the declaratory policy of Israel, and Peres says, "I'm the first one who said that."

Feldman: Well, there's a difference between saying it privately to the president and saying it publically in the Knesset.

Cohen: And in the Knesset he opposed it.

Feldman: Well, that's a different matter than a private assurance.

Cohen: But you confirm that in that meeting . . .

Feldman: Yes, I do remember that.

Cohen: Why did Kennedy . . . he was in your office, and Kennedy called him, why?

Feldman: To see him, that's all.

Cohen: No but, because of the nuclear business?

Feldman: Not about the nuclear business, no, no. Kennedy knows that when there's an important visitor from Israel he'll get some information, he was very curious.

Cohen: And Peres was very young at the time, he was, I think, 35, 38 . Well, older than that but still very young. The other thing I wanted to ask about, you may or may not know about it. It's a little mystery to me and I'm trying to resolve it and ask all kinds of people, you maybe can tell me who I should ask. In mid-December '69, Moshe Dayan[35] had a private visit in this country. This was a few weeks after the election when Richard Nixon was elected. Thirty-six hours and then he said to the Israeli press it was a private visit, "I'm not going to talk anything about what I said. I saw president elect Richard Nixon, Robert Anderson,[36] and I'm not going to say anything about what I said to them, it was a private visit and that's it." There are rumors which I heard from various sources—I take them to be rumors because I never see [saw] anything in writing—that he talked to them about two things: the Soviet involvement in Egypt and the nuclear business. He wanted to be sure because he fought in the cabinet to do certain things, and even Yigal Allon wanted to back off somewhat, and he wanted to be sure that there is understanding with . . . Because it's very unusual for a foreign leader, foreign defense minister, to meet a president elect. Presidents elect in those weeks do not like to meet anybody.

Feldman: No, they do. I recommended to Clinton he talk to foreign leaders, he didn't do it.

Cohen: But it's not very common for a president-elect to.

Feldman: No, but I think it's a good idea.

Cohen: Do you know anything about this visit?

Feldman: No, I don't.

Cohen: I mean he knew Robert Anderson from his previous involvement in the Middle East, obviously. But I thought it was very peculiar that he had this very brief visit, and he wanted to meet two people and that's it. And it had nothing to do with the F-4, because Rabin was in the embassy here and doing all the regular stuff. But he went . . .

Feldman: I don't know who I would ask. I'll ask a friend of mine, who's very close friends with Robert Anderson.

Cohen: So I can call you and ask about that later on? The other thing is the visit of Golda in September '69 with Nixon. I mean obviously you're a Democrat, but you knew something about that visit? Apparently it was a state visit, it was successful visit, and a lot of understandings were made, but not in paper. And Rabin in his memoir said that after that, the NPT just dropped, it was not on the agenda anymore. Do you recall anything about that visit and that context?

Feldman: Well, I remember the visit and I never talked to Golda about it. I spoke with Golda after that, but I never talked to her about it. What does Rabin say in the memoirs?

Cohen: Rabin describes in some detail, the pressure of Paul Warnke in the Johnson administration. Then I have documents myself. Look I have . . .

Feldman: But what did they say happened after her visit with Nixon?

Cohen: The issue dropped. The NPT business dropped. The last inspection of Dimona was in July '69.

Feldman: I wouldn't know what caused that.

Cohen: And Secretary Rogers,[37] he pushed a lot of stuff, and I have some of this, because they declassified some of this material.

Feldman: I don't think, I'm just speculating because I don't know, but I don't think that Golda would make a big point of American pressures, I guess for inspection. I just have to speculate, I don't know what happened. Have you talked to Joe Sisco?[38]

Cohen: I'm going to.

[Personal conversation excised]

[Feldman reads something]

Feldman: What's the significance of this?

Cohen: Well, this was a summary of the history in order to initiate, in order to write to Ambassador Barbour, to initiate another visit. Now, the bureaucracy under Rogers, including Sisco and [unclear name] and their initiative of the whole process, which I believe the president already, was . . .

Feldman: Had pushed it aside.

Cohen: That's right, now what's interesting is that . . .

Feldman: This doesn't seem to be a very strong memorandum to inspect. It just gives a history. I mean if I were trying to get . . .

[This is the end of side 1 of the cassette tape. The remainder of the interview is from side 2.]

Feldman: . . . possibility that Israel might have a nuclear weapon. I believe he [most likely President Kennedy] thought, as I did, that one of these days they would have it, that as an ally, it was better that they have it than that those who were not allies get it. And since it was inevitable, let's delay it as long as possible, but let's not make it an issue that disturbs our relationship. I think that was his feeling.

Cohen: And you think this is . . . because Ben-Gurion was very fearful, in fact, the Waldorf Astoria from his point of view, his biographer is saying, he went very deeply concerned . . .

Feldman: I know, as I said before, he had a reason for concern because we discussed at some length whether this was an appropriate topic or not for discussion at that meeting.

Cohen: And the decision was to mention it, but not to push it. And the decision was before . . .

Feldman: Before we went into the meeting, that's right.

Cohen: Because he was very concerned about that and that's a reason why he wanted Wigner and Rabi to say it was okay, and he was afraid that it's going to be really US-Israeli confrontation. So what you're saying is that early on, Kennedy felt that he wouldn't want to bring it to confrontation, he wanted to delay it, but it's important for him not to bring it to confrontation.

Feldman: He didn't want a confrontation. Again, as I say Kennedy was a very practical politician. [Excised] And it was inevitable that one of these days Israel would get nuclear weapons, and we could delay it, and we would delay it as long as we could, but we weren't going to make it an issue that we might lose on. It was so important to Israel, that the United States with all of its power could not have stopped it.

Cohen: What about the McCloy mission,[39] which was just shortly before Ben-Gurion resigned? Isn't it that that mission was intended, you know, [to ensure that] the Egyptians wouldn't have the missiles [and] the Israelis would curb their nuclear weapons?

Feldman: Well, that was the purpose of it. I didn't think it accomplished anything.

Cohen: It didn't, of course not. But, but that's the reason why, why the Senate, I mean this was still the one appointed to?

Feldman: I mean, all you can do is delay it; you can't prevent it.

Cohen: And you think Kennedy learned to live with it?

Feldman: I think he was prepared to live with it from the very beginning, unlike other members of his staff, and unlike the State Department. The State Department was pushing strict limitations and was prepared for confrontation. I think the same thing

was true of the Bundy operation. That's what you'll read I think in Komer's book, and he'll blame it on me. He doesn't have the right to blame it on me because I was just doing what I think the president wanted anyhow. But I could give him a rationale for it.

Cohen: It's interesting because in the Israeli perception, there was a sense that Kennedy was the president who pushed on that matter.

Feldman: I think most of the people around him pushed on it; I don't think they moved Kennedy. The same thing was true of the Hawk missile,[40] you know, they had dire consequences if we ever gave Israel the Hawk, um, but Kennedy decided on his own.

Cohen: The last thing I would like to ask you is another reference to Bob Komer. You know, he was in Israel when you were in the Johnson office in '65. Johnson gave him the plan with Averell Harriman.[41] Rabin talks about [it] in his memoirs, [writing,] "Harriman did not push the nuclear business, the person who pushed explicitly . . . "

Feldman: Was Komer.

Cohen: Was Komer. And he told Eshkol and Rabin, chief of staff, you must be very concerned because that's going to be a major confrontation, this business. We're not going to let you do this.

Feldman: That's what he always said, I mean that's what he said privately, that's what he said in that instance to the other party. That's not surprising.

Cohen: But it wasn't under Johnson's approval?

Feldman: No, that's correct. Johnson was very careful about it and I think everything you'll see in the record would show that he was not anxious to push it, he was not anxious for a confrontation above all. I don't think he had the intellectual disagreement with the Komer position, but again, he had a political disagreement.

Cohen: He was much more of a politician; he was a man of compromises anyway.

Feldman: Yes, exactly.

Cohen: I mean, somewhat like Eshkol. I mean, who can make a deal.

[Laughter]

Feldman: Alright, I've got to get some work done now.

[End of tape]

[1] This transcript has been edited lightly for readability purposes and annotated for convenience. Small sections may have been excised to protect confidential sources and personal information. These excisions are explicitly marked in the text.

[2] Recording began after the start of the interview.

[3] David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) was Israel's first prime minister, serving non-consecutive terms from 1948 to 1954 and 1955 to 1963.

[4] Golda Meir (1898-1978) was Israel's fourth prime minister, in office from 1969 to 1974.

[5] Levi Eshkol (1895–1969) was Israel's third prime minister, serving from 1963 to 1969.

[6] Shimon Peres (1923–) served as Israel's the deputy-director general and director general of the Ministry of Defense in 1952 and 1953 to 1959 respectively. In 1959 Peres became a member of the Knesset and was subsequently appointed deputy minister of defense until 1965. Perez played an instrumental role in the development of Israel's nuclear program, helping to establish the Dimona reactor facility and securing French aid in the 1950s.

[7] Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970) was the leader of the Free French Forces during World War II, prime minister of France from 1958 to 1959 and president of France from 1959 to 1969.

[8] Pinhas Sapir (1909-1975) was Israel's minister of trade and industry from 1955 to 1963 and minister of finance from 1963 to 1968 and 1969 to 1974. Sapir was the only cabinet level minister to oppose the Dimona Project.

[9] Research conducted after this interview indicates that in fact Israel first achieved nuclear capability in May-June 1967, not in 1966.

[10] Richard Helms (1913–2002) was the director of Central Intelligence (DCI) from 1966 to 1973.

[11] Dean Rusk (1909–1994) served as the secretary of state under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson from 1961 to 1969.

[12] Robert McNamara (1916–2009) was the secretary of defense for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson from 1961 to 1968.

[13] Paul Warnke (1920–2001) was an American diplomat and assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs for Presidents Johnson and Nixon.

[14] The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) seeks to encourage the peaceful use of nuclear power, while simultaneously attempting to limit the spread of nuclear weapons and promote disarmament. The NPT opened for signatures in July 1968, and entered into force in March 1970.

[15] Yitzhak Rabin (1922–1995) was Israel's fifth prime minister, serving two non-consecutive terms from 1974 to 1977 and 1992–1995.

[16] The F-4 Phantom is a US manufactured fighter-bomber. The Johnson administration attempted to connect the sale of the F-4s to Israel to the nuclear issue.

[17] Harry McPherson (1929-2012) was special council and chief speechwriter for President Johnson from 1966-1969.

[18] Bill Moyers (1932–) was the White House press secretary for President Johnson from 1965 to 1967.

[19] McGeorge Bundy (1919–1996) was Presidents Kennedy and Johnson's national security advisor from 1961 to 1966.

[20] Jack Valenti (1921–2007) was in charge of press relations for the Kennedy administration and later served as special assistant to President Johnson. Even after Valenti left to head the Motion Picture Association of America in 1966 he remained a valued confidant of President Johnson.

[21] Cliff Carter (1918–1971) was a trusted confidant and top fundraiser for President Johnson. Carter was also the executive director of the Democratic National Committee until 1966 when he resigned over questions about his fundraising methods.

[22] Robert Komer (1922–2000) was a staff member of the National Security Council from 1961 to 1965 and acting national security advisor from 1965 to 1966.

[23] In his book of the same name, journalist Robert D. Kaplan defines "Arabists" as Americans "who read and speak Arabic and who have passed many years of their professional lives . . . in the Arab world . . . as diplomats, military attaches, intelligence agents, or even scholar-adventurers." Used in the pejorative, an Arabist is a government official or policy-professional who is perceived to be excessively sympathetic to the interests of Arabs states over the interests of Israel.

[24] Zevi Dinstein (1926–2012) was prime minister Eshkol's deputy minister of defense from 1965 until June 1967, and as such he was in charge of the nuclear project. Later

he was the chairman and president of the Israeli Petroleum and Energy Institute from 1970-1989.

[25] Theodore Sorenson (1928-2010) was a lawyer, special council, advisor and speechwriter for President Kennedy.

[26] Robert "Bobby" Kennedy (1925-1968) was President John F. Kennedy's brother. He served as the attorney general under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and later as a senator until his assassination in 1968.

[27] Eugene Wigner (1902-1995) was a Nobel Prize winning physicist. Winger made notable contributions to the foundations of quantum physics, the structure of the atomic nucleus and XE-135 poisoning. During WWII, he worked on the Manhattan Project.

[28] Isador Isaac Rabin (1898-1988) was a Nobel laureate physicist who discovered nuclear magnetic resonance.

[29] Dr. Joseph E. Johnson, special representative to the U.N., suggested the Johnson plan in 1962 in an attempt to solve the issue of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. In his proposal, refugees would be given the option to repatriate or resettle in other Arab countries or throughout the world. Golda Meir rejected the plan, as it did not restrict the number of refugees that could return.

[30] Walworth Barbour (1908-1982) was the United States ambassador to Israel from 1961 to 1973.

[31] Ogden Reid (1925-) was the United States ambassador to Israel from 1959 to 1961.

[32] Phillips Talbot (1915-2010) was the United States assistant secretary of state for near eastern and south Asian affairs from 1961 to 1965 for Presidents Johnson and Kennedy.

[33] Matti Golan, Shimon Peres: A Biography,. (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1982).

[34] Yaakov Herzog (1921-1972) was the Israeli ambassador to the United States from 1957 to 1960. Herzog later served as chief of staff to Prime Ministers Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir from 1965 until his death in 1972.

[35] Moshe Dayan (1915-1981) was a noted Israeli military leader and politician, serving as the chief of staff to the Israeli Defense Forces from 1953 to 1958. He was minister of agriculture during Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's second term and minister of defense for Prime Minister Eshkol.

[36] Robert Bernard Anderson (1910-1989) was an American businessman and secretary of the treasury for President Eisenhower from 1957 to 1961. After leaving the Eisenhower administration Anderson pursued a career in investment and banking, although he stayed involved with governmental affairs by heading several diplomatic missions for President Johnson.

[37] William P. Rogers (1931-2001) was the secretary of state for President Richard Nixon from 1969 to 1973.

[38] Joseph Sisco (1919-2004) was a career State Department diplomat who worked closely on issues such as the 1967 Six-Day War. Sisco was appointed assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs by President Nixon in 1969, an appointment he held until 1976.

[39] The McCloy Mission was a special assignment given to John McCloy, a former assistant secretary of war, by President Johnson in 1964. The mission's goal was to try and reduce tensions between Egypt and Israel over surface to air missiles.

[40] The Hawk missile is a US surface-to-air missile. The United States first agreed to sell the Hawk to Israel in 1962.

[41] W. Averell Harriman (1891-1986) had a long and distinguished career in public service, holding numerous positions, including ambassadorships to the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, the governorship of New York (1955-1959) and was undersecretary of state in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.