

This interview took place June 3, 1988 at the home of Captain Ralph Williams, Falls Church, Virginia. The interviewee is Captain Ralph Williams, speechwriter for President Eisenhower. The interviewer is James Leyerzapf of the Eisenhower Library.

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS: We were thinking in terms of a State of the Union address, and as the weeks wore on it began to look as though the State of the Union address was going to be sort of a lame duck effort in any event, so at some point in this two months' procedure we switched over and, indeed, wrote the State of the Union message which the president just sent up to Congress as a document--he didn't appear there to read it or anything. Then, with what was left over we began to put together this farewell message--and I don't really know at what point the State of the Union effort yielded up the farewell message. I don't know where the idea of a farewell message even came from, but the next thing we knew we were engaged in that effort in addition to the State of the Union.

DR. LEYERZAPF: I see. Mac Moos says in his interview, and I brought a segment of it along, that the idea originated with Eisenhower--not that he used the term "farewell address"--but a couple of years beforehand had told him to be thinking about something; he wanted to leave something for the American people to remember. According to Moos' story it was about as vague as that. On the other hand, one of the historians who has written on Eisenhower claims that the idea was planted directly in Eisenhower's mind by Norman Cousins of the Saturday Review. Can you corroborate or comment on either of those stories?



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WILLIAMS: No, I surely can't. It could very well be that Cousins had some input to that because he did make several proposals for inclusion in the president's speeches--whether they were accepted or not--and this could very well have been something that Norman Cousins decided that the president should do, and the president could very well have picked up on it. The earlier thing may have just laid dormant in his own dustbin for that length of time and maybe Cousins just resurrected it-- I don't know.

LEYERZAPF: I see. Now, Cousins had an impact on speechmaking? Were these solicited or unsolicited comments?

WILLIAMS: For the most part, unsolicited. As a matter of fact, I suppose it was all unsolicited because we never solicited anything from anybody outside the Executive Branch. I've always maintained that there's only one other profession in the world that has as much competition from amateurs as presidential speech-writing. Everybody has some contribution to make to the president's speeches, and these things come pouring in on you from all directions all the time. Every once in a while we got something that was worth including, but most of the time it was just water over the dam.

LEYERZAPF: You don't recall cases of Cousins' meeting with the president formally to discuss some speech or topic?

it yourselves, you and Mac?

WILLIAMS: Yes, we would pretty much do it ourselves. If we got too far away from what we felt safe with, we'd show it to whoever the staff officer was who would have the cognizance of that particular area. For the most part, however, we really didn't need all that much help.

LEYERZAPF: I see. Very interesting on the speechwriting process. Let's turn to the Farewell Address at this point and if you could tell us something about how that was handled, the delegation of functions between you and Moos, for example.

WILLIAMS: Well, that memorandum that I wrote on the 31st of October had one bullet and one blank as you recall. The one that survived was--I think at that point I was referring to it as a "war-based industrial complex"--

LEYERZAPF: Yes, I've read that.

WILLIAMS: --which gradually evolved into "military". The other one, of course, was sort of a cry of dismay at all the civil commotion that was just beginning. Lord, I didn't know anything about civil commotion at that point, but I thought it was a viable topic that ought to be addressed. But it didn't get anywhere and it dropped out very early in the proceedings. I don't imagine it appears in any of those drafts that you have there.

LEYERZAPF: No, I'm pretty sure that it doesn't.

WILLIAMS: Moos' way of doing this was just to sit down and talk about the content of these speeches as we would formulate them, and if you had something that you thought ought to go in you made a pitch to him, and he'd think about it. If he liked it he would ask you to write up a full-text version of it--just a monograph, just a piece of the speech, whatever the topic was that you'd brought up. Then I'd put in mine, and I guess Steve Hess would do the same thing and Mac would take them and--he always called himself a carpenter--he would tack these things together--plus his own contributions, whatever he thought should go in. So Moos was the processor, and he was the one who produced the draft that went up to the president. At that point he asked me to work up something on the so-called war-based industrial complex, which I did. And, as I recall, there wasn't all that much change to it from start to finish. I customarily worked very carefully on the first draft in all my writings and usually--in the case of Anderson, for example, I never had to do much more than a few word changes to that first draft--so in this case there were some, possibly some minor changes, but I think for the most part the president eventually said just about what I had written in the beginning.

LEYERZAPF: That's what I see looking through these drafts; in fact, I xeroxed some of those portions and here and there maybe changed a word or two, but there's very little of that.

WILLIAMS: Well, I was lucky because not many pieces got by



without a lot of scrutiny and changes.

LEYERZAPF: Changes of that nature, where he deleted a word or two and added one or two--that's the kind of thing about this file that shows up.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

LEYERZAPF: Then, given what you said about his going back to square one sometimes, perhaps by the final reading he--I didn't check it against the press release copy--he might have put them back in, too.

WILLIAMS: Yes, possibly, I don't--

LEYERZAPF: It would be quite a chore for any researcher to go through all of that; it was a chore for me to go through it and try to sort it out. In this October 31 memo from your papers at the Library we find the phrase, "the war-based industrial complex". Do you recall who was responsible for that phrasing?

WILLIAMS: Well, that was my original thought off the top of my head. But as I got into writing the thing, it looked like what we were really talking about was a military-industrial complex rather than war-based. I think the "complex" part of it came-- you know, you get to the end of a sentence and you don't know how to end it up and this word comes to you and you write it in and that's the way it fits and that's the way it came out. But I remember specifically very well the phrase, "the military

industrial complex". It seemed to describe what it was I was complaining about.

LEYERZAPF: So you, then, were responsible for that later shift from "war-based" to substituting "military"?

WILLIAMS: Yes, that's right.

LEYERZAPF: That's been something that historians have been interested in for a long time and had many questions about.

WILLIAMS: As I explained to our young friend out in Ohio, you come out of these things and you sit down and you call your secretary in and you dictate off the top of your head what it was that you remembered about the meeting. This is the way it came out first, on October 31. And then you look at it and you think, gee whiz, I really didn't exactly mean it that way and this "merchants of death" reference is a bunch of stuff. So as I sit there in my solitude, facing my typewriter, some things get squeezed out and other things come in and this was the way that the "military-industrial complex" replaced the "war-based industrial complex".

LEYERZAPF: I see. Moos has commented in his interview about-- you referred to his dustbin--he made comments about that in the interview and made a rather cryptic remark that he picked up that habit from H.L. Mencken.

WILLIAMS: Yes.



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WILLIAMS: No, I can't. If Moos said that he did, I'm sure that was true because, of course, the president and Milton were very close. I know that Milton occasionally would come in and he would be in Moos' office talking, so I'm sure that Milton had a very strong influence on many of the things that the president said.

LEYERZAPF: You didn't see drafts coming back, though, that had Milton's hand-editing on it as though he was getting involved, in a detailed sense, in the speech?

WILLIAMS: No, no, I did not.

LEYERZAPF: I'm trying to define, to figure out exactly what Milton's role would've been. Maybe we can only surmise, but if you could help with that, we'd appreciate it.

WILLIAMS: With regards to this particular speech?

LEYERZAPF: With this particular speech. Moos just mentions his having--or the president having--shown it to Milton.

WILLIAMS: Yes, as I say, I really don't know to what extent, if any, Milton participated in the drafting of the speech. So far as the actual drafting is concerned, I'm sure it was for the most part Moos' effort; whether or not Milton influenced the president to have other things included, I just don't know.

LEYERZAPF: I see. I'm trying to get all the players sorted out. This may seem overly meticulous to you, but these questions

I can't see Milton sitting down there with Mac Moos, cheek by jowl at Moos' desk, writing in words for the president's speech-- I don't think he operated that way.

LEYERZAPF: You mentioned in one of your letters to us that the military-industrial complex portion found a rather ready and willing receiver in Eisenhower.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

LEYERZAPF: As though it didn't surprise you, perhaps, that he would've left that alone and left that in, pretty much as it was. Could you comment on this idea?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I can. Throughout his entire administration Eisenhower suffered the slings and arrows of people who wanted more money for defense, and more airplanes--mainly more airplanes because the air force had only been in existence about ten years and they came out of the army with a bee in their bonnet. They were going to conquer the whole world, I suppose. It had the energy of a new organization, with a new mission, and nothing was going to stop the U.S. Air Force. They'd had good tutelage there because the fellow who had brought the army air forces up to the point where it became the U.S. Air Force was an absolute master at publicity and public relations. This was good old Hap Arnold. I guess he's one of the great unsung heroes of the thing--he never got the credit that I'd thought he'd always deserved for his contribution to the

independent air force of the United States. But anyhow, the air force, United States Air Force, just considered themselves to be the only reason that the United States was still free in the menacing world of communism. They had a tremendous network of help among the aerospace suppliers, and the congressional people who benefitted--whose districts benefitted--from these contracts. They cultivated the newspapers, and worked the media for all it was worth, and politicians. So they had this great complex, if you will, to support the programs that the United States Air Force thought it needed. Meanwhile, Eisenhower had come in, in 1953, and one of the first jobs that he had was to get the armed forces back down to a reasonable size from their peak of the Korean War. So he presided over the demobilization of at least a million men--I think the force level went from about three and a half million men down to two and a half million, and the major weapons programs were cut back proportionately even more. Moreover, these cutbacks were proceeding at a time when much of the public was caught up in the Reds-Under-the-Bed hysteria of the McCarthy era, and when both the U.S. and the Soviet Union acquired the hydrogen bomb. And the president made his own contribution to his troubles by an almost obsessive concern in his public remarks with the need for fiscal restraint and balancing the budget. So the Democrats figured they had a live one: here was a miserly president pinching pennies at the expense of the nation's security, and wasn't it just awful, folks? And, with the appropriate coaching from the Air Force and its

this terrible missile gap, that Eisenhower had just let the United States missile effort go to pieces. Of course, at this point, you must remember, it sounded like they had a good case because the Soviets had Sputnik up in 1957, followed by several other heavy pay-load launches. They even hit the moon with a rocket in 1959 and we still hadn't gotten much of anything up there to speak of. The conclusion was that since we couldn't put anything into orbit, why, we were defenseless as far as missiles were concerned because it takes rockets to make them go, too. So all through the spring, summer and fall of 1960 there was this drumfire of criticism of Eisenhower's reputation on the missile gap. Of course, there wasn't any truth to that, either, and when the Democrats came in the following January and they looked around and realized that they were now going to be responsible for the defenses of the United States, why, all of a sudden the missile gap just disappeared. And McNamara admitted it. There was no missile gap, as you may recall. I'm sure, again, that since Eisenhower-- it was his administration that was being strung-up by the lynch mob--that this must've gone down with him just about the way that the bomber gap did just four years before. Of course, on my own part, I had similar feelings and I'm sure that when Eisenhower saw that all laid out there, why, he must've thought,--"Boy! That's what I want to say!" And apparently it was what he wanted to say because he made so few changes to it.

LEYERZAPF: As you said, virtually none, none of importance,



none of substance.

WILLIAMS: Right.

LEYERZAPF: And, of course, the wording in that does refer to the "combination"--yes, "we must never let the weight of this combination"--and it's referring there to what elements, in the use of the word "combination"? I guess it's just another word for the "complex"? Well, I can give it to you--one draft.

WILLIAMS: You mean the "we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence by the military industrial complex?" I believe that the final version was--I can remember--"unwarranted influence, either sought or unsought."

LEYERZAPF: Yes, that's true. It does read that way. Here's the final version.

WILLIAMS: Yes, that's right. And it was just, as I say, I think his sense of fair play had been outraged by the liberties that these Democratic politicians had taken and he just wanted to set the record straight. I do think that he could also envision the possibility of this thing getting out of control and inducing the government to do some very dumb and dangerous things at the behest of these people who had so much influence. { Gosh, they had hundreds of billions of dollars worth of spending power, and they blanketed the entire country so that you got congressmen from all over the country beholden to them, labor votes, local politicians, satellite industries--all of whom have money and voting power. I can imagine that he figured that if the thing ever got unbalanced--and this

is, of course, the thing that he had to bear in mind: that it's not just the military-industrial complex that could run away with government policy; other things could, too, unless the government is protected by the checks and balances of its constitution and the natural pluralism of the people who can be trusted to be sensible enough not to be swept away by any of the propaganda of a fear campaign or that kind of thing.

LEYERZAPF: "Balance" seemed to be an important word to him; I believe that the military-industrial complex portion is prefaced by a paragraph on balance.

WILLIAMS: Yes, it is. He went to some length to explain that in the text of the speech, and then later on in his book, Waging Peace, he expanded on that. This was certainly in keeping with his philosophy, because he did deeply believe that this country was capable of doing anything it wanted to do provided it could weigh the differences and find the right combination, which would be the balance.

LEYERZAPF: So it's consistent with his overall philosophy?

WILLIAMS: Right.

LEYERZAPF: Really consistent, which probably does explain why it went virtually unchanged. Philosophically, he'd have felt comfortable, as you see it, with this sort of thing? It's followed by that section warning against a scientific-technological elite,

or a combination or some kind that could be a problem--now, you drafted that section?

WILLIAMS: Yes, and I don't know at what point that got into the speech. Does it appear in these drafts that you have?

LEYERZAPF: Yes, it is in these drafts, so it apparently got in before the first of the year.

WILLIAMS: It got in before, and probably as a substitute for the thing that didn't fly about the breakdown of orderly societies. It's kind of a subset of the military-industrial complex, too, because for the most part these very complicated and sizeable scientific and technological establishments were born out of the military research and development of World War II. In that respect, they're part and parcel of the military; they're the scientific element of the military-industrial complex. And scientists are corruptible, too. There's a great art of grantsmanship that the scientific community--or at least certain individual scientists--engage in, whereby they make certain findings and a lot of times they don't even bother to have a peer review; they go immediately to the newspapers with their findings and they get everybody all upset. This is particularly true, I think, in the environmental part of the scientific community. I can well remember, at the crest of the environmentalist wave, where some professor down in Texas came forth with a--he was just sure that we were going to burn up all of the oxygen in the atmosphere and all suffocate because of the lack of oxygen. Well, of course, this is ridiculous,

