

Part of the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

An Oral History Interview with
LEON PANETTA

Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
National Archives and Records Administration

Interview by Timothy J. Naftali and Scott Spitzer



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Descriptive Summary

Interviewee: Leon Panetta

Interviewer(s): Timothy J. Naftali and Scott Spitzer

Date of Interview: 23 May 2007

Location of Interview: Yorba Linda, CA

Length: 67 min.

Administrative Notes

About the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

The Richard Nixon Oral History Project was created in November 2006 at the initiative of Timothy Naftali, weeks after he had begun his tenure as director of what was then the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff at the National Archives and Records Administration. (The Nixon Presidential Materials Staff became the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum on July 11, 2007, with the incorporation of certain facilities in Yorba Linda, California, that formerly had been operated by the private Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace.) The project was intended to preserve the memories and reflections of former Nixon officials and others who had been prominent in the Nixon era by conducting videotaped interviews. Starting in February 2007, Paul Musgrave, Special Assistant to the Director, coordinated the project, which was housed in the Office of the Director.

Naftali insisted from the project's inception that it be a serious, impartial and nonpartisan source of information about President Nixon, his administration, and his times. A second goal of the project was to provide public domain video that would be available as free historical content for museums and for posting on the Internet. Donors to the project neither requested nor received a veto over interview questions or interviewee selection. (Funding for interviews, materials, and support staff came in part from the Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace foundation, which ceased to support the project in 2007; in part from donations from Nixon administration alumni; and in part from the appropriated and self-generated funds of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library itself.) Accordingly, the project includes interviews with former staff members of the Nixon administration as well as journalists, politicians, and activists who may have been opposed to the Nixon administration and its policies. Taken as a whole, the collection contributes to a broader and more vivid portrait of President Nixon, the Nixon administration, and American society during the Nixon era.

With over 120 interviews completed as of August 2009, the Richard Nixon Oral History Project is the first publicly available, comprehensive oral history project of the Nixon administration. Given the unique circumstances of the Library's birth and the contentious history of the Nixon materials, no full-scale oral history project had been undertaken by the National Archives before Naftali's arrival, nor had the private Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace foundation committed itself to such a task. There had been earlier attempts at Nixon-related oral histories, which met with varying degrees of success. The Center for Oral and Public History at California State University, Fullerton, collected more than 200 interviews in the late 1960s and early 1970s; this collection is available

through COPH. An extensive exit interview program with departing administration officials run by the National Archives and Records Service (as it was then known) during the Nixon-Ford administration has not been processed in full as of August 2009. The first Nixon Foundation, which operated during the Nixon White House years, undertook an oral history project in 1970 to cover Richard Nixon's life up to his entry into political life. Following the collapse of that foundation in the wake of the Watergate scandal, those oral histories were transferred to Whittier College and have not yet been released. The Nixon Presidential Materials Staff interviewed several former Nixon officials in the late 1980s and a few others in the early 2000s, but these programs were not sustained. Gerald and Deborah Strober published excerpts from interviews with Nixon-era figures in their 1994 book *Nixon: An Oral History of His Presidency*. In the late 1990s, the *A Few Good Women* project, sponsored by Barbara Hackman Franklin and the Pennsylvania State University, recorded interviews with approximately two dozen former Nixon officials about the administration's drive to increase the number of women in the senior levels of the federal civil service. John Whitaker, an independent researcher and former Nixon administration member, conducted several dozen interviews in the early 2000s; those interviews, which are owned by the Nixon foundation, are closed to researchers.

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Suggested Citation

Leon Panetta recorded interview by Timothy J. Naftali and Scott Spitzer, 23 May 2007, the Richard Nixon Oral History Project of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

Duplication Services

Contact the Richard Nixon Presidential Library for information about duplication of DVDs and original master tapes.

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Oral history interviews are expressions of the views, memories, and opinions of the person being interviewed. They do not represent the policy, views, or official history of the National Archives and Records Administration.