

8 July 1968

Owen Spann, interviewing Fred Cook (TAPE ERASED)

....Spann: Your comments on Johnson: he promised us both guns and butter; LBJ was man of limited knowledge of foreign affairs and he was, by both experience and temperament, ~~an~~ a man oriented to think in military terms. He was told, just several days after John Kennedy's death, unless the current trend could be reversed in 60 to 90 days a Communist-controlled state was inevitable in Vietnam.

Cook: Yes, Owen, I think this is, you see, the basis of really a great deception. This was at the time, well, like '63, five days after President Kennedy was murdered in Dallas. At this time the public pronouncements were that we were doing swimmingly in Vietnam. We were doing so well we were going to be able to bring some of the boys home by the end of 1965. And yet, at the first session that Johnson held with his advisors he was given the real lowdown, which was that the regime we'd been supporting over there was collapsing, it had no strength, really, among its own people to sustain itself, and that the only way it was going to be sustained was that if we did on a much more massive scale -- we went in on a much more massive scale than we had been. Yet the people weren't told this, and during the following ten months of Johnson's administration before the election of 1964, he was assuring us that we were not going to be militarily involved in Vietnam. Recently, oh, just the last month or so, Tom Wicker of the New York Times did a whole reassessment of this for the Atlantic Monthly; and ~~came to~~ ^{possibly} what I think is the most charitable conclusion that one could ~~come~~ to -- his conclusion was that Lyndon Johnson, in his eagerness to grab every vote in sight in the 1964 election, made promises to the American people that he knew very well that he might not be able to keep. Personally, all the indications to me are that it went further than that -- that he knew darned well he wasn't going to keep them, I think. The proof of this is not conclusive, but when you put everything together in context it seems to me to add up to this conclusion. And this, I think, was a great deception. I think it was the thing, probably above all others, that has led to this disillusionment of the people with the electoral process. And as I said, the Gallup surveys for NBC showed that seven out of ten Americans believe that politicians will say anything they think will help them get elected. Which is a devastating and destroying thing in a democracy.

Spann: On this quote that we could have both guns and butter, do you really feel he thought his Great Society could clear up our domestic problems of the day?

Cook: Well, I think he did. And I think, of course, that he felt -- I think he had no conception that the Vietnam war would mushroom on the huge scale that it has. I think that unfortunately he followed the military advice, which was that we go in and we bomb a little bit, and we force them to the bargaining table. It's very curious to me: I don't know whether you've ever read Elie Abel's book on The Missile Crisis., the inside story as near as it can be told how John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy engineered the removal of the Russian missiles from Cuba without getting us into a nuclear confrontation with Russia. Well, one thing that came out of that book to me very clearly: the Kennedy's' refused to take the advice of the very people whose advice Lyndon Johnson has been taking. In other words, the Joint Chiefs of Staff just wanted to go in and invade, or bomb Cuba off the map overnight, Dean Rusk, as much as anybody could tell what he thought, was somewhat on the same side of the fence -- these were the people whose advice Robert Kennedy, who headed the inner council of advisors at this time, and ^{and} president Kennedy, refused to take; they sought another way out, /I think fortunately for all of us because you and I might not be sitting here today, they found it.

Spann: Would you say the Cuban missile crisis represents possibly our only world victory in years ?

Cook: Yes. The only time in which we found a sensible really rational solution in this terrible world in which we live...

Spann: We looked good.

Cook: Yeah.

Spann: To the world.

Cook. That's right. |