

Oral History Interview

NSA OH 23-82

with

DONALD F. COFFEY

4 November 1982

M52 Office, FANX III, NSA

By R. D. Farley

FARLEY: Today is 4 November 1982. Our interviewee is Mr. Donald F. Coffey. Mr. Coffey was one of two NSA security officers tasked with the repossession of classified material from the home of Mr. William Friedman on 30 December 1958. Mr. Coffey will recount what happened during that visit to Mr. Friedman's home. The interview is taking place in the M52 office, FANX III, NSA. Interviewer is Bob Farley. The classification of this tape will be FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY--although Mr. Coffey states he believes the information is not classified.

FARLEY: Mr. Coffey, thanks much for giving me this time and it may be a little difficult to recall what happened twenty some years ago, but do the best you can. So we can set the stage, would you just give me a little personal background before you joined NSA, whether you had military experience--anything that you think should be in the record.

COFFEY: All right. I came to the Agency in 1956--November--from the FBI. I was with the FBI for eight years prior to that time. And I've been in the Office of Security since my entrance into the Agency with one overseas tour during that time. In 1956 I originally went into the Investigations outfit within M5 and I was transferred from Investigations to our Industrial Security effort sometime in '58. In '62 there was a reorganization of M5 and I was moved from Industrial to the Physical Security Division and I stayed there until I went overseas and since I've come back I've been in the Industrial and Field Security.

FARLEY: Did you know Bill [] at the FBI?

Non - Responsive

COFFEY: I know of him, I don't know him.

FARLEY: Well, Bill is working with the []--that's where I first met him.

COFFEY: I've met him a couple of times. I'm not sure when.

FARLEY: Well, that's fine. Okay. Sir, the real purpose is to sort of recollect what happened when somebody at the Agency decided that the Agency should have back material that Mr. Friedman either borrowed--or whatever--that was in his possession at his home. Do you remember any discussion early in 1958--or mid-'58--about this problem or were you involved in it then?

COFFEY: My recollection of that incident was that I was involved in the extent I was directed by my superior, I suspect it was Bill Lewe, but I don't recall, to accompany Paul Gilliam from the AG's office down to Dr. Friedman's residence and retrieve some documents as well as government property. And Gilliam and I went down. Now Gilliam arranged to get a truck, and as I recall, got a couple of GSA helpers to move the equipment.

FARLEY: Remember what type of equipments it was?

COFFEY: Well, my recollection is kind of office type stuff. I recall-- I think he had a two-drawer safe that was government property. I think we brought that back. There may have been some...a desk or chairs or something like that...plus the documentation. My recollection was that he was a consultant to the Agency. I'm not sure of that and I think he had CONFIDENTIAL material. That would be the highest classification. There wasn't anything higher than that to my recollection. This was in his residence. And Wes Reynolds was the Director of Security at the time. I think Jack Hilsbos was his Deputy. My recollection is Friedman knew we were coming. I mean it wasn't we just appeared on his doorstep. They were going to retrieve this stuff and I think he knew about it. As I recall his wife was home, too. And, he was very cordial to us, but he was obviously upset by the action being taken.

I recall him saying some remarks about Wes Reynolds. He didn't appreciate Wes Reynolds.

FARLEY: Reynolds was not with you was he?

COFFEY: No, Wes Reynolds was the Director of Security at the time. I was the only member from the Office of Security and, as I say, Paul Gilliam and a couple of helpers to move the stuff. As I recall, they had a pretty good size truck. I don't think we had that much material to get, though.

FARLEY: Was NSA or any of the people in Security aware of what type documentation he might have had? As I said in the questions here, was there a "want list" given to you people?

COFFEY: I don't recall that, no. You know, it would figure--I was in the Industrial section at the time--the Industrial Security was a branch of the Physical Security Division. It would figure that someone from Industrial Security would go down there because we were responsible for consultants. My recollection was he was a consultant to the Agency. But, I don't recall having a list of documents that he had. My recollection was we went down and asked him for what he had, we didn't search his house or anything of that nature. He said "Hey, this is yours. Take it." We took it.

FARLEY: Oh, he offered it to you and then he'd say "This document belongs to you, take it."

COFFEY: Oh, yeah, because we weren't in the position--as I recall he had a den where all of this stuff was in his residence and he was the one that identified what he had to my recollection.

FARLEY: Okay, so you didn't have to go through the library shelves and say, "This is ours!"

COFFEY: Absolutely not. Absolutely not.

FARLEY: Good.

COFFEY: As I say, he and his wife were cordial to us. They weren't appreciative of the actions that were being taken, but they knew about it and they weren't in agreement with it, but they were cordial to us as the representatives that had to carry this out.

FARLEY: Did he have most of the classified material in the safe or under lock and key or was it displayed on the shelf.

COFFEY: No, to my recollection, he didn't have much, as I recall, and the highest classification would be CONFIDENTIAL. And it was in a two-drawer, three-position combination safe which is more than adequate for CONFIDENTIAL material, even in a residence. I don't recall any implication that there was anything wrong from a security sense as to how that material was handled or the fact that it was there. My recollection was that was all above board and was known to the proper authorities. It was just the fact that the decision was made that, "Hey, I guess there is no longer a requirement to have that stuff so let's get it back."

FARLEY: Would you remember any of the titles of any of the documents?

COFFEY: No, I don't even recall looking at the individual documents.

FARLEY: Do you think any of them might have been his "personal" papers?

COFFEY: I have no idea. I would doubt not because we were taking what he was giving us and I think if there was any question in his mind he very easily could have said, "This is mine." We wouldn't have raised any issue about that. He tried not to make it an adversary type of situation, which I don't think it was, other than, as I say, he didn't appreciate the decision.

FARLEY: You didn't have to explain to him why you were there. You said he was aware that you were coming.

COFFEY: To my recollection he was aware we were coming and the purpose of why we were coming. Yes, he was aware because if we appeared on his doorstep and said, "Hey, give me the documents in the safe," I don't think we would have gotten in the door. Yeah, he knew.

FARLEY: Did he ask for an inventory of the documents that you were picking up?

COFFEY: Don't recall. But if he did, we sure would have given it to him. Maybe Gilliam would recall, I don't. Because I don't recall. We were probably there less than an hour to my recollection. It wasn't any deal that took all day or half a day. We were in and got out of there.

FARLEY: Do you remember whether it was just the two safe drawers that you put in cardboard boxes and took back or did you take the whole safe?

COFFEY: We took the whole safe. It was a government safe.

FARLEY: So that was still filled with a lot of documents too, or he had cleaned them out and showed them to you?

COFFEY: I don't recall that. But the fact that we were there less than an hour, I don't think there was an awful lot of material. Again, that was way back.

FARLEY: It's difficult to remember that.

COFFEY: The one thing that I remember is, as I recall, I guess he had a heart condition or something, because he had an elevator in his house. I remember that.

FARLEY: I guess that was quite a while after his illness, wasn't it? It must have been. I think that was in the '40's.

COFFEY: I'm not familiar. He obviously had to use that elevator to get up and down stairs. I even forget where that residence was. I think it was in Washington somewhere. But I forget where.

FARLEY: The highest classification of any document that you saw-- was there any TOP SECRET CODEWORD?

COFFEY: Oh no, no. See, because that would have been a problem in my mind. I didn't come away from there with a feeling that we had had a security problem because of him having the material. I'm quite sure the highest thing was probably CONFIDENTIAL, and I doubt if there was much of that.

FARLEY: Was RESTRICTED a classification in those days or had that been discarded after World War II--do you remember? Seems to me that after World War II that went out.

COFFEY: Yeah. I don't recall that as being a classification. I don't know about the restricted data in connection with the atomic energy program.

FARLEY: Oh, yes, right. So the bulk of the material as you recall would be CONFIDENTIAL.

COFFEY: No, I think the bulk of it was probably UNCLASSIFIED.

FARLEY: That's interesting. That's interesting.

COFFEY: I don't think he had much CONFIDENTIAL material either.

FARLEY: Because the way this situation has been blown out of proportion. He had TOP SECRET CODEWORD material and this has been talked about so many years that it gets better every time somebody tells the story.

COFFEY: Oh, boy, no that's not my recollection at all because I think I'd have remembered that. I would have been concerned.

But I don't remember anything being against the security regulations which I was familiar with at the time being in Industrial Security. I don't recall that that was a bad situation in a security sense. I'm sure it was CONFIDENTIAL in a safe that more than met the requirements.

FARLEY: I think you probably answered this again, but let me ask... since you didn't see documents it is probably difficult to say. I'm trying to find out whether most of the documents or any of them were SIGINT-related or COMSEC-related or R&D-related?

COFFEY: I wouldn't be in a position to answer that. In fact, I don't know. I think Gilliam in the Agency at the time had the accountability for documents. If there was any accountability required it was done by the AG and Gilliam was the AG representative in this excursion, so any inventory and so forth would have been done by Gilliam. But I don't recall that and we would have been there quite a while if that occurred. But, no, I wouldn't be in a position to say. I didn't read any of the documents that were retrieving.

FARLEY: The covers wouldn't indicate whether it was an old NSA document or an NSA or a Security Service or Naval Security Group?

COFFEY: You know, if it's straight CONFIDENTIAL material, I don't think there's any requirement for any cover.

FARLEY: Did anybody have to carry a weapon because you were going down to retrieve classified material? Do you remember?

COFFEY: No, I'm sure. I would have been the one that would have been armed and I don't recall being armed for that.

FARLEY: Because you didn't know what you were going to find probably, so, why antagonize?

COFFEY: Well, what do you mean?

FARLEY: Well, Mr. Friedman seeing someone come in with a weapon.

COFFEY: He wouldn't necessarily observe that.

FARLEY: You could keep it under the coat, I'm sure.

COFFEY: When you're armed, you were them on your hip under your jacket, and unless you're looking real, real close the normal person wouldn't even be aware of it.

FARLEY: Right.

COFFEY: No, I don't recall. I'm pretty sure I wasn't armed. There would be no requirement for it. Because I don't recall that when we were going down there we were anticipating finding highly classified material. I think we knew going in that the highest thing he had was CONFIDENTIAL. So we didn't go down there expecting to find any material with caveats on it that would upset us.

FARLEY: Sure. I suppose Paul would know whether Mr. Friedman had signed for all these documents and he probably had receipts so they knew what was there.

COFFEY: Yeah, there may have been some exchange or receipt given, just for the government property. That would be very normal, let alone any classified documents. I know we took the safe, I'm quite sure of that, because you know it was kind of difficult to move

and that's why we had those other fellows with us. And, I'd expect him to ask for a receipt for that, which he probably did.

FARLEY: Right. Do you remember the conversation when you left Mr. and Mrs. Friedman? Was it "Nice seeing you," or was it cordial, still cordial or quite cool?

COFFEY: No, as I say they were cordial to us. They knew we were just carrying out a function resulting from a decision that had been made by higher authorities in the Agency, so there was no animosity towards us as individuals. As I say, though he did not like the decision that had been made that he was to return this material. And I would gather that if he...and I'm pretty sure he was a consultant at the time that his consultant relationship was being terminated. He didn't like that.

FARLEY: I know. Do you remember at what level the decision was made? Was it ninth floor?

COFFEY: No, I wouldn't be in a position to know that. I could just guess that certainly it was at the ninth floor.

FARLEY: Yes, right, I would guess.

COFFEY: Wouldn't be in a position to know. I would have got it from probably Reynolds to Bill Lewe to me.

FARLEY: What rank were you then? Do you remember?

COFFEY: I was probably a 12.

FARLEY: Oh, I see. So just like all of us--take it as it comes down the channel, right?

COFFEY: Right, right.

FARLEY: When you brought the documents back to the Agency, do you recall what the disposition was?

COFFEY: No, because that would have been Gilliam's bag, really. Those documents wouldn't have come in to security. The AG would have taken any of that.

FARLEY: You didn't have to do an impact statement or anything like that?

COFFEY: No, as I recall it probably took a couple of hours to get down there and do it and get back. Didn't leave a lasting impression on me, other than I knew he was a very famous individual, of course, and his reputation in the community and his contributions. That governed our actions, of course, we were very respectable in dealing with him during this period of time. Quite a famous man.

FARLEY: Do you recall whether any documents were later returned to him? That they might have discovered shouldn't have been brought back?

COFFEY: No, I don't recall that. I wouldn't be in a position to know that, really. Other than if they were going to return a classified document to security. I don't recall anything like that happening. And I remained in the Industrial arena until '62, so I would have remembered that if that happened. I don't recall.

FARLEY: Were there any other similar incidents later on involving Industrial Security or yourself where you had to go retrieve documents or government property?

COFFEY: No, I don't recall any of that nature.

FARLEY: Well, Mr. Coffey, I've sort of exhausted my questions. Anything else you want to put on record?

COFFEY: No, I'm sorry I can't be more precise, but it's a long time ago, and it was just a chore that was done.

FARLEY: It wasn't embarrassing at all to you because you probably didn't know Friedman's background as well as...

COFFEY: Well, I knew that he--yes, before I went down I made it a point to get a little rundown on who I was going to be dealing with. I'd only been in the Agency a couple of years, but I knew that he had made many contributions and we were very businesslike, professional and cordial.

FARLEY: Good. Now that shoots down another story because again, fifth-, sixth-, seventh-hand story. People say that gee, he went beserk and he was throwing books around and saying "take this, take that".

COFFEY: I don't recall that. You know, as I say, he didn't like the decision that was made, but unless my memory is very faulty, I don't remember any scene like that. Sure don't.

FARLEY: Good. Well that makes me respect him more, because I always thought he was a pretty great man.

COFFEY: Sure. He had a fine reputation. But now Gilliam may recall that. Of course, it was an uncomfortable chore for Gilliam and I, naturally. But we tried to do it as businesslike and I remember it as a fairly cordial thing, under the circumstances.

FARLEY: Of course. When is Paul due back? Do you have any idea?

COFFEY: He just went over there. So he has a couple, three years. Unless he comes back on TDY. In fact he was just back on TDY. I saw him a couple of weeks ago.

FARLEY: That's what I thought. I heard that too. I'll have to grab him up.

COFFEY: There may have been a statement by Friedman, you know when he handed over some document, "take this", but as far as throwing it or any big scene like that, no. He was more of a gentleman than that.

FARLEY: Did Mrs. Friedman voice any opinion at all during this time?

COFFEY: My recollection is that she was present and she let it be known, I think, that she was unhappy with this decision because it made her husband unhappy. And she thought, especially in the view of his contributions, that this was a wrong decision to have been made. My recollection is that. And I think that she was a very, if my memory is right, a very nice lady. She didn't take out any of her feelings on us, that I recall.

FARLEY: Okay. As I say, Sir, that just about does it. Is there any classification? Do you want to put any classification at all on this tape?

COFFEY: No, I see no classification warranted for this.

FARLEY: All right, then. What we'll do is put it in our archives. Make it available to anyone you want. I'll send you a paper later saying "everybody can see it", or "nobody can see it", or "people in between can see it", and transcribe it and keep it forever.

COFFEY: Do I get a copy of the transcription?

FARLEY: Yes, Sir.

COFFEY: Okay.

FARLEY: I won't promise it to you tomorrow.

COFFEY: I'm in no hurry.

FARLEY: Maybe by the time you retire. I have 8000 hours, believe it or not, 8000 hours of untranscribed tapes.

COFFEY: Oh, wow.

FARLEY: So, I can put this in on top of the pack.

COFFEY: No need to put it in the top of the pack as far as I'm concerned.

FARLEY: But, yes, when it's available you'll certainly get a copy of it. And if it's unclassified, if I'm still here, they can send it to your home.

COFFEY: Yeah, I can't see any reason why it would be classified.

FARLEY: Anything else before I switch off?

COFFEY: No.

FARLEY: All right, Sir. Thanks much for your time.