

**Abdirashid A. Shermarke Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 8/4/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Abdirashid Ali Shermarke

**Interviewer:** E.A. Bayne

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**Biographical Note**

Abdirashid Ali Shermarke (1919 - 1969) was the former Prime Minister of Somalia between 1960 and 1964. This interview focuses on Shermarke's reasons for admiring John F. Kennedy (JFK), the need of the Somali Republic for military assistance, and the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Kennedy administration, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Abdirashid A. Shermarke

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Abdirashid Ali Shermarke—JFK #1  
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Oral History Interview

with

ABDIRASHID A. SHERMARKE

August 4, 1965  
Mogadishu, Somalia

By E.A. Bayne

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BAYNE: Here begins the Kennedy Library Oral History Project interview with His Excellency Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, former Prime Minister of the Republic of Somalia, at his home in Mogadiscio on the 4th of August, 1965. His Excellency is being interviewed by Mr. E.A. Bayne of the American Universities Field Staff. Your Excellency, you wish to make a general statement -- and I see that it is written in Italian. Would you like to read this first, and then we will go on with some more specific questions that this may stimulate for us?

SHERMARKE: All right. According to what I have been told at the American Embassy in Mogadiscio, Professor Bayne [unintelligible] to learn my opinion of President Kennedy. From what I understand, these opinions of mine would be part, let me say, of a collection of judgments expressed by those who, like myself, have had the honor of meeting President Kennedy. Is that correct?

BAYNE: Right.

SHERMARKE: To serve, I am told, the oral history project at the Kennedy Library. In that case, I am pleased to give my modest contribution to so noble a plan.

However, before expressing myself on the subject, I wish to state that even before meeting President Kennedy personally I had great admiration for him because I had previously read his book, *Profiles in Courage*.

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I had realized that for the author, as well as for the personalities portrayed by him in his book, moral conscience meant more than anything else; and the fact that he had been elected President of the United States, though relatively young, and also belonged to a religious minority in America, was the best proof of the exceptional quality of this man. The memory of Kennedy remains for us Africans principally bound to that of the great fight by him courageously and tenaciously fought and sustained to assert and actually to put into effect the equality of all American citizens, the end of all discrimination among them, the removal of every shameful racial barrier in his great country. To that fight Kennedy dedicated his best energies, well knowing that he would clash with old prejudices and rooted egotisms, but convinced also of rendering a great service to his country; thus dispelling the suspicions and differences of other nations towards him and his policy. We Somalis went to Washington already convinced that we should find in this new man of American politics comprehension and collaboration for the solution of our problems. His fame as a sincere fighter for peace, his lively interest in the problems and the needs of the newly independent countries, the fact that during the short period of his mandate he had wanted to meet and discuss with many African men of state, strengthened our conviction. We were especially impressed by the extreme frankness in the discussion, a warm cordiality, his deep knowledge, thoroughly detailed, of our problems, his prompt intuition, his keen and open intelligence, the

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the natural liking he awakened; these were gifts which certainly contributed to the success of our discussions. One can therefore state that Kennedy brought America closer to Africa, making the Africans better acquainted with America and consequently the Americans with Africa. Therefore, America and the whole world owe Kennedy much, because the legacy left by him to the American people and all humanity is vast. In conclusion, the memory of Kennedy is always alive in us Africans and, moved, we remember his unfortunately short but intense life as a heroic fighter for the assertion in the world of the superior ideals of peace, liberty and social justice. And I am finished.

BAYNE: I think that's a wonderful tribute...

SHERMARKE: Short, but...

BAYNE: ... it really is. But there are some other aspects to discuss. You had this picture of him, before you went to Washington, that you had drawn from *Profiles in Courage* and that you had read in the newspapers -- a general picture. When you met him, personally, what was the first impression you got of his

personality? Was it youth? Was it power -- that he was President of the United States? Was it just a friend, a fellow chief of state, so to speak -- can you reconstruct the effect on you personally of his personality?

SHERMARKE: First of all, it isn't easy for anybody, finding himself face to face with the President of the United States for the first time, to be at ease. One of the first impressions I had of this man is exactly that -- making his guest comfortable, starting a friendly discussion before discussing problems of state, in order to put his guest at ease. So he had this ability to make himself a friend -- immediately. Naturally, here I should add that there was his frankness in discussion, a warm cordiality, and here, if you follow, the knowledge he had of our problems -- knowledge that I in the prepared interview have

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defined as thoroughly detailed familiarity with our problems.

BAYNE: Several people have said this. He was remarkable in knowing the details of each country. He had read about them and had studied them with real earnestness before he met visiting officials. To go back to this preconditioning of your attitudes before you went. There had been several events that had happened which might have caused suspicions for small nations, something that would change the general image of President Kennedy. The first, as I mentioned, was the Bay of Pigs, in which it might have looked as though the United States was being an "imperialist" and that somehow Kennedy was in effect directing the power of a great nation in an unfriendly, overbearing way. Secondly, in your own case, I know that you had wanted to go to Washington for some time before you went. In fact, Ambassador Andrew G. Lynch was very much involved in getting some time on the President's schedule so that you could meet him. What was your opinion of the Bay of Pigs incident? Did this worry you, as a Somali, that the United States was becoming more "imperialist" under Kennedy, or not?

SHERMARKE: Now, I have spoken of him as a man and of the admiration I had, and before I met him and after my meeting, but I shouldn't want to get deeply into what is American foreign policy, or even domestic policy. This, in a way, would involve the policy of nonalignment assumed by the Somalian government since its independence. Therefore, I absolutely do not want to say whether the government of the United States had been right or wrong in its action. Not because President Kennedy alone decided the fate of his country -- embarking maybe in dangerous, let's say, decisions -- but the government of the United States (I don't say the President alone, because he must have consulted the members of his Cabinet.) Thus, if you don't mind, I should like to abstain completely from the question because it might in some way involve our policy of

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neutrality.

I recall that exactly at the time of my visit, the Indo-Chinese conflict was developing. I was besieged by journalists seeking to know my opinion in the matter, but even then I abstained because before going to Washington I had, in my capacity as head of the government of the Republic of Somalia, addressed a telegram to the two governments, Indian and Chinese, in which I invited them to resolve their conflicts in a friendly manner. I told these journalists that if I condemned one side, my government would be in no position to invite them to resolve their differences peaceably. That is why sometimes the policy of nonalignment requires abstention from what pertains to the foreign policy of another country, whether big or small, it doesn't matter.

BAYNE: Even with these petitions on foreign politics that you cite but in which Kennedy was involved did these affect your attitude towards him as a person?

SHERMARKE: It is very difficult... I had an unlimited respect for the man, an unlimited respect for the man, beyond any doubt. And this is no mystery, no secret. It is something I can cry out to the four winds.

BAYNE: Even though Somalia has its own policy towards Soviet Russia and the West and is a neutral by definition, did you have a personal reaction to Kennedy's confrontation with Soviet Russia in Cuba? Were you concerned about this? You remember the missile crisis in 1962?

SHERMARKE: I remember well, I remember exactly the American intervention in Cuba as a part of its foreign policy, but these are those questions, exactly, that I don't want to comment on at all.

BAYNE: But did you feel that it has been a success, as far as the Americans were concerned?

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SHERMARKE: Certainly, the whole world was very happy then, I think, that this did not provoke a world war -- an atomic war, I am sure of this. Therefore there was a grateful appreciation that President Kennedy, and also Khrushchev, understood that it was not worth causing a world war.

BAYNE: It was an appreciation of the safety of the whole world.

SHERMARKE: In this, and without compromising the policy of neutrality of the Republic of Somalia, I can say that I was very happy that a world war did not begin -- but that's all I can say.



BAYNE: In talking with two other chiefs of state -- the Shah of Persia and Mr. Ben-Gurion of Israel -- on similar interviews, both of them seemed to, agree, separately, that one of Kennedy's great contributions as a president, in the very short time that he held the post, was that he made coexistence between Russia and the West possible. The world could live with it, and for small nations like Israel and like Persia, his was an extremely important contribution to history. Do you feel this the same way?

SHERMARKE: This certainly I can say, that although West and East -- speaking in Italian, Occidente ed Oriente -- pursue different ideologies, there had developed a coexistence of the two blocs. Certainly President Kennedy made a great contribution toward the realization of this which has greatly aided world peace. This I can say without reservation, although you will agree, Professor, that such a policy cannot be made by one side without collaboration from the other. In this, perhaps as great a contribution -- it doesn't matter whether in bigger or smaller measure -- has been made by the East. The two sides agreed, tacitly or explicitly (it doesn't matter; I wasn't present when they met in Austria -- it seems the two sides have agreed) to this compromise of a policy, let's say, to this spirit of compromise.

BAYNE: You mentioned the Indo-Chinese, and the Indian and Chinese

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situation. In the case of Vietnam, did you feel that President Kennedy's involvement of the United States in Vietnam was a healthy thing for your country? How did you react to it? Did it matter to you what the United States did there, or was it something that you could look upon from Africa somewhat remotely and say, "Well, this problem is not close to us?"

SHERMARKE: Now, when one starts talking about specific problems or certain conflicts in one part of the world, first of all, one should speak with knowledge of the facts. I know only what I read or what I hear on the radio, and I have no knowledge of the casual problems or reasons that have induced the United States to intervene. As the world has probably never fully understood the Congolese question, I believe that it would not be objective on my part, therefore, to express myself on the question. But, speaking frankly, I must respond from the point of view of Somali interest. We Somalis have a yardstick here near us -- Somali people subjected to massacres, actual massacres. We have not broadcast this news, maybe because we have lost faith in the world, and when I say "in the world" I especially mean among the great powers. When I see that these great powers know the pitiful condition of the Somali peoples subject to Ethiopian imperialism very well, or the imperialism of the English before and now of Kenya, and they don't act on what I consider a human question -- truly human -- because it involves the massacre of human lives; when I do not see these great powers intervene on behalf of these people, what do I think? After all, they are human beings.

Well, then, I cannot justify intervention elsewhere in the world. I cannot justify any other intervention even though in Vietnam it is a question of conflict among the people of Vietnam itself -- it doesn't matter if some are Communists and others are not -- here it's a question of another

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state that is destroying people, citizens belonging to another country. Now, if America or the Soviet Union -- and not until the United States or the Soviet Union -- intervenes in our problem, I as a Somali can never justify -- first of all as a Somali -- such interventions positively. This, of course, speaking bluntly.

BAYNE: I am sure this is your position, and it also implies, it seems to me, the moral side of international affairs.

SHERMARKE: My opinion on the subject is not objective. My opinion on the subject could not be objective because I always have a yardstick, I always have the Somali question. Until I see -- and I don't see -- the great powers intervening in this problem, I cannot justify their intervention elsewhere. American or Soviet intervention in any part of the world should be justified by a human motive, otherwise it is not justified. And I ask myself this question, aren't we Somali human? Equally human? If not, then I cannot justify them anywhere.

BAYNE: Could I return to the specific interview that you had with Kennedy? One of the things that you were discussing in the interview as I remember -- or one of the things that you went to America to discuss which I knew because you and I had discussed it about three months previously -- was the possibility of reaching some agreement on the supply of arms to Somalia. Did you feel that Kennedy had any real understanding of what you were talking about in terms of arms?

SHERMARKE: Of course, of course.

BAYNE: He did.

SHERMARKE: He certainly did, and I am sure that then he had every intention to meet the needs of the Republic of Somalia as far as military assistance was concerned. That notwithstanding, a few months later the Emperor Haile Selassie

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visited him, and insisted, I should say, or made it necessary to choose between either Somalia or Ethiopia. As the English had done many times, the choice of President Kennedy fell to Ethiopia rather than Somalia.

BAYNE: You are sure.

SHERMARKE: It was a blow that made him fall short of the promises he made to the Somali delegation! Because of that understanding we had, the dispatch of a military mission to Somalia to study our needs resulted in what? If I am not mistaken, six jeeps mounted with six anti-tank guns. That's all. Can you consider military aid six jeeps mounted with six anti-tank guns? No. I do not conceal the great disappointment that I felt then, the great disappointment that I felt, and I have never concealed it. In fact, I said to Ambassador Torbert in your embassy that this was (I don't know whether I precisely said this) a sort of betrayal of us. Certainly it was unfriendly. We had some promises that, because of the Ethiopian pressure, were not fulfilled. I personally have considered this a variety of betrayal by a friendly nation. After all, we feel ourselves to be closer to America than Ethiopia because of our democratic institutions. These are democratic institutions that you, Professor, know did not arise with our independence, or through our governmental organizations, but had really already existed in our private life. We have always met in the open, we have always decided democratically our questions and by a majority rule.

BAYNE: In your opening statement you talked about the tragedy of his death, and the memory that's left. Do you feel now that this period of the Kennedy regime was clearly unique, and that United States leadership changed radically after Kennedy's death? That Mr. Johnson represents an altogether different kind of approach to his government and by his world

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view? Do you think there is much difference, or has the United States simply continued being pretty much the same as far as Somalia is concerned?

SHERMARKE: Now, one of the causes of my admiration, my boundless regard, as I have said, in the short period of his mandate, was his invitation to meet fifteen or twenty more or less -- I don't know the number precisely -- African chiefs of state or heads of government. I am sure that if he were still alive he would have visited Africa, which was the hope of all us Africans. But personally I do not know President Johnson, and therefore I have no prejudices against him, absolutely. But I should like to see him continue the African policy of Kennedy.

BAYNE: Most African leaders are young -- you yourself are young -- and because Kennedy was young this meant that you shared the same experience. Do you think possibly his effect on Africa had something to do with his youth?

SHERMARKE: More than to his youth I attribute it to the quality of the man, a quality that was especially Kennedy's.

BAYNE: You had never met any other American president, had you?

SHERMARKE: No.

BAYNE: No, but there was apparently a difference for you in this man.

SHERMARKE: Of course.

BAYNE: Did you feel that Kennedy understood - or would have understood your action as a prime minister of a neutral country in going to Moscow for arms? Do you think that this would have been -- you mentioned, for example, the frankness of your discussion -- that this would have included a comprehension of why you had to do this?

SHERMARKE: Kennedy was a man of broad views. He was a democratic man in the true sense of the word. I have no doubt, therefore, of his comprehension of our problems. He knew that we turned to the Soviet Union and why we did so,

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pushed by our need, without on the other hand, naturally, involving our policy of neutrality.

BAYNE: Six months before your meeting with Kennedy you had said that if the West did not supply you with arms, that you were going to ask the Soviets.

SHERMARKE: Not only that; I added that if I knew the Devil personally, I would turn to the Devil to satisfy what were the needs of my country, the essential needs, the vital needs, because the question of military assistance was and still is for us a vital need. You know, we do not have any intention at all to attack anybody, apart from the fact that we are in no position to do so, although I think that we could, in the case of Ethiopia.... You know that when the fiduciary mandate on Somalia ended, the territorial question was pending, and the last decision of the United Nations was that the two countries should continue to negotiate to come to an agreement. Ethiopia felt very, very strong compared to Somalia, just because of its armament -- I should say it's great armament... that she had received in the preceding years especially from the United States. It was a factor that induced her to disparage us to the point not only of killing the Somali population on the border and even within the borders of the Republic, but even to refuse to discuss this territorial question with us. Now, it was my thought, and I recall the thought of most Somalis, that obtaining military assistance at least in what you call a balance of power, would enhance our capacity to negotiate with Ethiopia, lifting us from this humble position.

BAYNE: It was the need for a military posture. I think that's right. When you talked about the possibility of arms aid, did President Kennedy give you any idea

that the United States would request an exclusive relationship in military assistance?

SHERMARKE: No.

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BAYNE: He said nothing about this? This all came later?

SHERMARKE: No. Absolutely not. He knew that by doing so he would have offended a democratic principle. Our position was clear to Kennedy and to everybody else. From the beginning we had declared ourselves neutral.

BAYNE: This suggests something which I have found in these other interviews. President Kennedy's understanding and sympathy for your country, as for others, was in a sense greater perhaps than that of the Department of State. I know that the Shah of Persia felt this, that while Kennedy's attitude and policy toward the Middle East was, in personal conversation -- as the exchange of letters between the two chiefs of state indicated -- a warm, cooperative feeling, yet when this policy or relationship was converted into something, a treaty or a statement of a policy by the United States, it was always moderated. It seemed that the Department of State had intervened and influenced Kennedy after you had had your conversation. Do you think that this possibly was true, that the personality of Kennedy was more generous than the reality of the United States policy?

SHERMARKE: Now, Professor, I repeat that I had and still have a boundless admiration for this man, and I am the first to defend him against whomever would attack what you could call his personality -- the personality of this great man. Naturally, the policy of the United States is another thing. It must be something else. Positively, I should like you to make the distinction between the man Kennedy on the one hand and the policy of the United States even during the period of his regime on the other. Naturally, a chief of state can be influenced by his own government. I do not know where this took him in his naturally varied decisions, and as I said I do not want to comment on the subject. But what I will never tire of saying is that I have always

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had and preserve still -- with pride, I would add -- a boundless admiration toward this man.

BAYNE: This differentiation is very interesting -- it seems to be the case all around the world, that he was all by himself and is estimated in this way. When did you read *Profiles in Courage*?

SHERMARKE: Before going to the United States, I think, in Italian.

BAYNE: When he was elected, did the image of him that came to you in the press and the radio mean anything to you? Did you have any understanding or feeling of what kind of a president he might be?

SHERMARKE: First of all, I followed like many others the phases of the presidential elections in the United States. I must confess that even though I have, as I have said, a great admiration toward this man, I had the thought that in some way he could not win because he was relatively young compared to his opponents or with the presidents who preceded him, and belonged to a religious minority. When he was elected president, I felt, naturally, that something in the United States was about to change because it meant that religious prejudices did not exist in the United States; and the fact that religious prejudices did not exist could in some way, without any doubt, also have diminished racial prejudices. That is why I was very happy about the Kennedy election, because I tied one thing to the other. Once the religious prejudices have withered, so racial prejudices must disappear -- a fact for which I congratulate the American people. This means that having elected a Catholic president, later they could elect a president -- let's say -- of Italian origin, or a Jew, and then maybe of African origin.

BAYNE: It is very interesting, this transfer of thought. I wasn't in Somalia the day that he was assassinated, but you were still in office. Were you shocked? What was your personal reaction at the moment? You've given

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me a broad picture in your opening statement, but when you heard it on the radio were you worried for your country that Kennedy, as the president of one of the great powers, was suddenly gone? There has been an analysis -- several analyses -- made, that suggest that when Kennedy was killed this was, as one might think of it historically, that an emperor was dead and suddenly there was emptiness and nobody was quite sure what the world balance of power would be. Did this kind of thought in an historic sort of frame enter your mind at all at that time?

SHERMARKE: Well, Professor, I think that with the assassination of President Kennedy there was not only a vacuum in the world's institutions but also an emptiness in world thought. What I felt that night and maybe all the next day was as it was for all. I was without a thought because it was inconceivable that such a thing could happen. There was a stop in my reasoning. I could not conceive of such a thing. That is why I say that there was not only an emptiness in what must change -- what would be the balance of power, or what -- but also of thought. Because the whole world remained almost -- how can I say, how can I define it -- I think, paralyzed.

BAYNE: We are very nearly done, I think. During, your conversation with him, did

you find that he (you were there also, Mr. Ambassador<sup>1</sup>, and there were people from the Department of State, including Mr. Rusk) -- as he had done in other interviews -- that Mr. Kennedy had taken the principal -- you -- off in a corner, perhaps during lunch or during the meeting, and the two of you would have a talk with nobody else present. Did he do this with you?

SHERMARKE: I don't remember well, but I think that in his speech, in his first speech, as soon as I got off the plane, he mentioned the strategic importance

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of Somalia, just because it is situated on the Horn of Africa, and the strategic importance of the Horn of Africa generally. Of course I did not make any comment on this in my answer. No, there was absolutely no secret conversation.

BAYNE: These conversations were not secret in the political sense. They were secret in a confidential, personal sense.

SHERMARKE: There was none.

BAYNE: Thank you very much, Mr. Prime Minister. This will be a very interesting interview. In about three months, I think, I will be back and -- you wish to make a final statement?

SHERMARKE: Naturally, concluding this conversation with a friend of mine, I should like simply to make clear the distinction between the man, Kennedy -- for whom, as I said, I have a boundless admiration -- and what might be the policy of the United States, which can vary. Naturally, you know that the policy of a government varies; it is fluid, and therefore it is not right to say that it is always good or is always bad. What I would like to have as American policy above all is what the Somali had at the beginning -- not understanding only, because they still have an understanding -- and I believe that there is a solid friendship between the Republic of Somalia and the United States -- there is no danger. The relationship has a foundation that should never incur any danger. But naturally we should like -- we believe, we are convinced, as Somalis as a people and as a government -- we are convinced that the United States can do something about this question between Ethiopia and Somalia. It is a friend of both countries and, therefore, having resolved other world questions more difficult than this, we say that you could do something. This is some...

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BAYNE: I agree with you, and I wonder whether this feeling on your part was why

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<sup>1</sup> H.E. Omar Mahallim, former Somali Ambassador to the United States, was present during this interview.

you could operate a neutral policy, with China, with Russia, with the Eastern bloc, with confidence that the United States was not going to make it an "either or"... No? You don't ...

SHERMARKE: No. A chief of state must, first of all, and above all, respect what the constitution is. The constitution is the real law of his country. Our constitution, developed before independence and approved the same night of our independence, sanctioned in Article 6 -- I don't know what paragraph -- that Somalia is a friend of all peoples -- a declaration of neutrality. Since it is a declaration of neutrality, I was naturally bound by it, and until that article is changed by somebody or other laws approved in the meanwhile, any Somali government, present or future, is bound to respect and carry out that policy. The day when the Republic of Somalia, as a result of a real necessity, shall minimize the importance of this policy, that's another matter. But there will be, necessarily, a change in the constitution.

BAYNE: Thank you very much for this. I am sure this will be very interesting -- not only for history but for all of us who are working on it.

BAYNE: Here ends the interview for the Kennedy Library Oral History Project with His Excellency Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, former Prime Minister of the Republic of Somalia, interviewed by E.A. Bayne of the American Universities Field Staff at his Excellency's home in Mogadiscio on the 4th of August, 1965.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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