

Constance Casey Oral History Interview—10/13/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Casey, President Kennedy's personal representative to the Uganda independence ceremonies (1962), discusses her trip to Uganda, interactions with African dignitaries and State Department officials in the United States, and a meeting with John F. Kennedy about Uganda, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Constance Casey

October 13, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Let us begin by asking you how the trip to Uganda came about and exactly what took place.

CASEY: Well, President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] asked me in early December of 1962, to represent him at the Independence of Uganda, which was scheduled for October of that year. President Kennedy was aware of the value of information from informed, dedicated, and enthusiastic citizens outside of the career foreign service as a supplement to the information that was available to him through regular channels. I think he was very happy to send such persons on missions, knowing that they would be good additional source for his information. President Kennedy inspired the most prodigious preparation for these missions. With the assistance of the State Department and from other sources, I had prepared myself to the highest degree possible. If some people regard President Kennedy as a candidate for sainthood, it's because of his respect for facts, for coming as close to the whole truth about a country or a situation or a relationship as can possibly be achieved. He was a man of abounding humility, a man of neither pride nor prejudice. There were no barriers between him and objective truth.

During the week I spent in Uganda as his representative, along with four other members of the delegation, I felt the powerful impact he had on the people of Uganda and on all Africa. By his comprehension of their aspirations, and by his comprehension of the realities of their problems, and by their identification in their new government with his

leadership in

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our government. I visited hospitals and schools, and I met with many people in Uganda: with delegates from Africa and other countries, and from all over the world. There was no place where he was not honored. Because of my being a representative of the President, I formed a friendship with the Prime Minister, Milton Obote [Apollo Milton Obote], during the week of October 9, 1962, at the Independence ceremony. Before leaving Uganda, I was asked by our chargé d'affaires Olt Deming [Olcott H. Deming], who was later appointed by President Kennedy as our ambassador to Uganda, I was asked to give a small dinner in New York a week later, on Sunday October 21, when the Prime Minister came to New York for the admission of Uganda to the United Nations. This was supposed to be a small dinner party; but at the reception at the State Department, the dinner was enlarged to include the ambassadors to the U.N. from the countries adjoining Uganda, or having interests in common with them. And so we asked representatives from Kenya, Sudan, Somali Republic, Uranda, Burundi, Tanganyika, and so on. Our dinner and reception which was held in New York at the River Club for the Prime Minister was a very felicitous introduction for him to a very distinguished and worthy group of Americans, who were to a degree aware of the existing crisis. That was the week of the Cuban confrontation.

On the following day, Monday October 22, the Prime Minister flew to Washington where he talked with the President between four and five o'clock about the problems of his country, the problems of East Africa, and Africa in general. President Kennedy had had quite a busy day that Monday. He'd talked on the telephone with President Hoover [Herbert C. Hoover], President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], and President Truman [Harry S Truman]. He'd met with the National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He met with Prime Minister Obote at four o'clock, and talked with him for about forty-five minutes. He escorted him to the front door of the White House with a special gracefulness that the President had. He was an extremely courteous man. After that, he had a meeting with the Cabinet, and he addressed the nation at seven o'clock on television.

On Tuesday, the following day, I sat beside Prime Minister Obote at a Blair House luncheon given by the Attorney General Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] in honor of the prime minister. The Prime Minister expressed to me at that time the most profound admiration for President Kennedy's knowledge and his interest in African affairs. The Prime Minister told me that he would work in his country, in East Africa, and throughout Africa to advance the purposes of the United States. He regarded this as consistent with the interests of his own country. Some time after this, the President asked me to come by the White House for a meeting with him.

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He asked about Uganda. It was like an oral quiz, master of highest degree. He said, "You did a good job in Uganda, and I want you to go to Kenya for me." Kenya independence was coming up in December 1963. And I regarded representing President Kennedy as the highest form of service to one's country. At that time also he spoke of my going in early 1964, to

South America, and he asked me to discuss that with Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan]. In a subsequent talk with Ralph Dungan I heard of the President's wish that I should go to Zanzibar, as well as to Kenya. I was preparing to go in December of 1963. These plans were altered November 22.

STEWART: Very good. Well, let me ask you a few more specific questions on your trip to Uganda. First of all you mentioned that you had done some extensive preparations for the trip. Could you give us some examples of exactly what the preparation included?

CASEY: The State Department is rather skilled in briefing operations, and that was where we began first, with the Uganda desk officer, and then with the very able Richard Sanger [Richard H. Sanger], who was the advisor on African affairs to the United Nations. And then you found that once you know that you are going to a particular place, you discover all kinds of things yourself about it. You discover people who have lived there, people who know a great deal about it. I read the [World Bank International Bank for Reconstruction and Development] report which had just been published on Uganda, quite a number of books in the economic background, and some of the problems with regard to the products that were native to Uganda.

STEWART: Senator Smith [Benjamin A. Smith, II], I understand, was...

CASEY: Senator Ben Smith was the head of the delegation.

STEWART: Right, and who else was in the delegation? There were four or five other people.

CASEY: Tom Farmer [Thomas L. Farmer] was a member of the delegation; Ted Baker [George T. Baker] and David Grant [David M. Grant]. Among the early discoverers of Uganda from the world outside of Africa were two distinguished men named Grant [James Augustus Grant] and Baker [Samuel White Baker]. It just was coincidental that two members of our delegation were also named Grant and Baker.

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STEWART: What other specific objectives, other than the ceremonial aspect of the Independence did the delegation, or was the delegation charged with? You were undertaking certain conferences and certain dealings with the Uganda government, I assume.

CASEY: I was tremendously impressed by the way that the our consular office, it was then the consular office before Uganda became a nation, had made the preparations for the deployment of our time and energies; that our daily schedules, would you like to hear a sample of it?

STEWART: Yes.

CASEY: I rose about seven o'clock in the morning. We had a conference with the chargé d'affaires, Olt Deming each morning at nine o'clock, from nine to nine forty-five, and then we went on our separate ways to meet with other officials. I found myself, probably being the woman member of the delegation, assigned to hospitals and schools. I visited the University of East Africa, Makerere University, and talked with a great number of people there. On one occasion I went to a luncheon for women delegates from all over the world. And as I came out of the luncheon, having an appointment at two-thirty for the opening of the museum at which my attendance wasn't particularly required, I'd found that there are two or three African women waiting to talk to the woman representative of President Kennedy. And we had an hour's conversation conducted in—my part was in English—but it was in Swahili, in Ugandan, in three or four different dialects that are spoken in Uganda. It was an hour, I think, in which we developed a great rapport. And that I think is when you feel the full impact of knowing you represent the country, and establishing the best possible relations.

STEWART: What types of questions were they asking you? What was the general theme of the discussion of the hour?

CASEY: Well in some cases they wanted to express appreciation for Operation Crossroads which has been in existence, and members have done very fine work; they were anticipating the coming of the Peace Corps, very excited about that and what it would mean to them. They had practical problems. Their crops are extremely limited. Their diet was very poor. This was something the women especially

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were interested in, and they hoped we could help them establish a sample garden with different variety and samples of vegetables so that they could expose the other members of their family to a better diet. They talked about schools, about trade schools, about the kind of vocational opportunities there were. They wanted to have their sons know how to fix radios, and so forth.

STEWART: How familiar did you find some or most Ugandans that you talked with with the political attitudes of President Kennedy? Were they quite familiar with his career, for example, and were they quite aware of, for example, the differences between he and the former president as far as his attitude toward world affairs was concerned?

CASEY: I think that because of... President Kennedy seemed to me at that time to be very well known in Africa. There was no question. He had traveled extensively in Africa. He had been a member of the African Affairs Sub-Committee, and the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate. I'm sure he felt a deep

interest in Africa, and I feel that he communicated this to each person that he talked to. And for this reason there was a corresponding, reciprocal feeling in regard to him.

STEWART: You definitely felt that they understood, and they appreciated his concern, or his interest in the whole area?

CASEY: With an overwhelming expression of grief at the time of his assassination. School children came in and carried roses. There was a very positive manifestation of their very deep feeling for him. He was regarded as a very special person in regard to the United States. And I think each member of our delegation felt this. This rapport, this link that we were between the people in Africa to the President.

STEWART: On your return I assume you prepared a report of some sort. What exactly did you do on your return?

CASEY: I gave an oral report to Assistant Secretary Williams [G. Mennen Williams] for an hour and a half or two hours, giving all the details of my observations. I did not prepare a written report.

STEWART: Were you generally satisfied with whatever was done to follow up on your findings, or the findings of the other people in the delegation, or...

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CASEY: I had no particular.... See this being a temporary appointment, you want to remain rather separate from the regular channel after you had completed your mission. I discussed also with Under Secretary Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman] at some length my observations on the trip to Uganda.

STEWART: What was his reaction, or what was he especially interested in?

CASEY: Averell Harriman is, you know, intensely interested in that aspect of the world. Among the questions that he asked me was the possible influence of the Chinese in East Africa, and I had learned that there was considerable support, financial support of the labor unions by the Chinese.

STEWART: You mentioned, I think in relation to some other possible trips, your dealings with Mr. Williams. Would you care to comment any further on those?

CASEY: No, I gave a long report to Mennen Williams. I think to a large extent, it confirmed a great deal that he already knew, and I think perhaps hopefully, I supplied a good deal more information, of course.

STEWART: That was the only trip. These other trips that you mentioned never

materialized.

CASEY: No, unfortunately not.

STEWART: Do you recall exactly what other delegates you met with when you were in Uganda?

CASEY: Yes, the delegation from Great Britain, of course; the French. I think no country failed to be represented there.

STEWART: Did you meet with any of the Soviet delegation or...

CASEY: I didn't meet with the Soviet delegate.

STEWART: And you didn't meet specifically with the President or anyone outside of the State Department on your return? Your report was given to...

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CASEY: Yes, to the President, to Assistant Secretary Williams, and informally to Under Secretary Harriman.

STEWART: Unless there is anything else that you feel you'd like to go into as far as Uganda is concerned, do you want to go into some other things before that, or shall we stop?

CASEY: I think that's all.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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