

Myer Feldman Oral History Interview –JFK#9, 8/20/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Feldman, (1914 - 2007); Legislative assistant to Senator John F. Kennedy (1958-1961); Deputy Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964); Counsel to the President (1964-1965), discusses developing a plan for the refugee problem, the secret mission to Israel to work for peace, and further initiatives to solve the refugee problem during the Kennedy Administration, among other issues.

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Myer Feldman – JFK #9

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Ninth Oral History Interview

with

MYER FELDMAN

August 20, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: In our discussions today we'll start on the general topic of the Middle East and in particular we'll discuss the problems of the refugees in Palestine. Let me begin in a very general way by asking how did you initially become involved in this problem after January of 1961?

FELDMAN: Shortly after the Inauguration the President [John F. Kennedy] and I discussed very briefly what should be

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done in the Middle East. The President was concerned about the history of failures in that area; about the possibility of something like the Lebanon crisis that attended Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]; and about the commitment he had made to try to do something to bring peace in that area. He asked me, as well as a good many other people what I thought about it, what I thought could be done. The only thing I could think of at that time was to discuss some of the bases of the problem. I, perhaps somewhat naively, and I think I was mistaken – from a hindsight point of view – that I at that time thought that peace might be maintained if we removed some of the reasons for the friction. And I said that I thought one of the major areas in which there was a complete difference of opinion between the Arab and the Jews, the Israelis, was on the question of refugees. I don't want to go into the details

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as to how the problems arose and so on, but I did discuss all of that with the President. He was generally familiar with it, but was not familiar with the details for the basis of the problem. What I did spell out in some detail was the current situation. And he was very interested in the current situation at that time. There were over a million refugees on the roles and the roles were inaccurate. The Arabs used the refugees as a propaganda device and the Israelis felt that they didn't have any responsibility for them. There had been some efforts in the past to resolve the problems of the refugees, all of which had been to no avail.

But I thought that we might, by discussing it privately with Nasser [Gamal Abdel Nasser] and with the Israelis leaders perhaps lead to some kind of solution. The President asked me to develop a plan and to see whether or not I

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wouldn't have a program to present to him other than just this general discussion.

STEWART: Was this in the first month....?

FELDMAN: This was just a couple of months after the Inauguration. I'd say it must have been around maybe March. March or thereabouts. In the early Spring anyhow. I sent the President a note saying that I'd like to talk to him a little bit about the problem about two weeks later. I had thought about it. I had talked to various people about it. I had even talked to the Israeli ambassador by then. I had talked to some Jewish leaders too. I talked to Abe Feinberg [Abraham Feinberg], I remember, the Israeli Ambassador and various others. And the President of course said, "Come on in" on the note. I came down one evening along about seven-thirty or eight o'clock and suggested an exploratory mission which might see how far each side would go in integrating the refugees into

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either Israel or the Arab countries that surround it. And the President listened and thought it was a possibility anyhow and said, "Let's think about it."

Then about a month later I guess he said to me that instead of doing it that way he thought maybe it would be better if it were done under the auspices of the United Nations. And he wanted a top flight person who could take charge of it under the auspices of the United Nations. I'm not sure who first suggested that that person might be the president of the Carnegie Foundation. I think it was Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.], but I'm not sure. And the President thought he'd be good. So, he was informally approached by the person who suggested it. I think it was Arthur, but I'm not certain. Johnson [Joseph E. Johnson] who was president of the Carnegie Foundation, who had had nothing to do with the Middle East

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up until that time had had a good background and good record was therefore a pretty ideal person for the job.

STEWART: That's the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace?

FELDMAN: Yes. Was approved by the President. And then the problem was to put it through the United Nations machinery. The job was given to Arthur, I know, to discuss with Adlai Stevenson. And the United Nations Secretary did approve it. And they decided the device for doing it would be through the PCC, the Palestine Conciliation Commission. I don't want to describe the Commission to you. So, the three countries on the Commission were sounded out: the United States, Turkey and I think France or Great Britain...

STEWART: Great Britain.

FELDMAN: And Great Britain. How did France get into it? We talked to France also. But anyhow

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we also talked to France about it, but it was Britain, Turkey and the United States who were on the Commission. They tended to follow the leadership of the United States anyhow on this Commission so they approved it. And Johnson, as you know, was appointed. And Johnson then was sent on the mission.

STEWART: This was in the Fall of 1961, I believe wasn't it? In November.

FELDMAN: Well, it took some time to go through the motions. Oh yes. Well, sure, it had to be in November because...

STEWART:

FELDMAN: No, no, no, no. The announcement of the Johnson appointment had to be at the time the debate started on the resolution on refugees, because one of the ways of resolving the continuous disputes on refugees was by saying, "Well, we're going to appoint somebody now who's going to look into the

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whole question." And he was appointed. His report didn't come out in November. It must have been after that. His report must have come out in 1962.

Let me go through for a moment my recollection anyhow of the sequence of events. Johnson was appointed. He spent a long time interviewing the government. He first started

out, I think, with the idea that he could resolve this by getting an accommodation between the various governments. So, he would talk first to the Arab government and then he would talk to the Israeli government. He developed the notion that the Arab government perhaps would absorb the refugees if they were paid something. The Arab governments then rejected that concept. He then talked to the Israeli government and asked them if they'd take some of the refugees. They said they wouldn't except with some terms, some limitations which

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I won't go into right now. And finally he decided that on the basis of all his conferences he did have a proposal and he would be able to resolve the issue. But before presenting his proposal he came to the White House and he talked to me and he talked to Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], and I don't know who else. I guess Arthur Schlesinger too. It may have been Mac rather than Arthur. But anyhow whoever it was. But Mac Bundy was involved in this conference. We had a meeting with him. He outlined generally what his proposal was. I had some hesitancy about whether or not the Israeli government would accept this proposal and I stressed that to him. He said that he had the same doubts, but that if it were modified so that it did not compel the Israeli government to take any refugees at

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all he thought it could be acceptable. And after maybe two or three hours of meeting with him we decided that we ought to meet with the President also. So Mac Bundy and Johnson and Bob Colmer [William Meyers Colmer] and I asked to see the President formally. Normally I'd go in to see the President at night on anything that concerned me. But this was such an important, such a formal matter that we jointly called Ken O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and said we'd like to set up a formal appointment for the President to meet with Johnson and for us to discuss the plan. The appointment was arranged. We met in the Cabinet room, and the President came in and expressed his thanks to Johnson for undertaking the mission and then listened as Johnson spelled out the plan. The President didn't have much to say about it except that with his peculiar knack of being

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able to reach into the future he said something along the line of, "Well it sounds all right but this can't work out because of the political matter neither the Israelis or the Arabs would probably take it," at which point Johnson said that he had met with both the Israelis and the Arabs. He thought that there was a very good chance that they would take it. Oh yes, another person that was present there was Strong [Robert C. Strong], Bob Strong. He is now our Ambassador to Iraq. And he was then the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in charge of that area. And he urged very strongly that this was a sound plan and this was a plan that the Israelis would accept if it were properly presented to them. And the president said, "Well, I guess our only chance with the Israelis at least is to get it presented favorably." And he

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looked around the room and he looked at me and he said, “How about you going over and getting them to accept it?” At that point I said that it would be tough, I’d have to offer them something in return because all we were doing was asking them to take a position that they had rejected in the past. But if that was what he wanted, why I’d be glad to take it. And it seemed to be the general feeling in that room that if there was any chance of the Israelis accepting it that chance would only be realized if I went over and talked to them about it first.

We then discussed briefly the need for secrecy in the mission. We didn’t want anybody else to know about the plan, least of all would we want the Arabs to know that we were talking to the Israelis without talking to them. I raised the question as to whether

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or not it would not be useful, however, if somebody did not talk to Nasser at the same time I was talking to Ben Gurion [David Ben-Gurion], particularly if the Israelis were going to take it. If the Israelis were going to accept then it was the general feeling there, and this included the President, that it would be important that we get the acceptance of Nasser as quickly as possible. He was the key on the Arab side. We considered sending people over to wait in Cairo. And when they got a signal from me they’d go and talk to Nasser. It was eventually decided however that we wouldn’t send anybody special over for that purpose but instead we would rely on our ambassador. Badeau [John S. Badeau] was Ambassador then. And he would wait a signal from me. And we had a prearranged method of communication under which when he got the word he could go in and talk to Nasser and see whether

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Nasser would agree. I don’t want to go into the details of the plan, but basically it called for the Israelis taking those who, under free choice, chose to come to Israel and the Arabs taking those refugees who, under free choice, chose to go to their countries. This sounds like a good plan but to an old politician like the President...He immediately could see all the gimmicks in it. Free choice is a pretty good word but he said, “It’s a free choice for who?” That’s about the way it worked out.

Well, the decision was made anyhow that this was what we would do. And I left almost immediately for – we can time this meeting and this presentation by Johnson by the date of my trip to Israel. I’m not sure what the date was. It was in ’62, as I remember.

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STEWART: August.

FELDMAN: August ’62?

STEWART: Right.

FELDMAN: That sounds about right. So, I went to Israel. Oh yes, one of the interesting things about it was that the President said nobody from the White House can go to Israel without raising considerable discussion. There would be discussion in the Israeli press and there would be discussion in the Arab press and in the American press perhaps no matter how we try to hide it. So you ought to have some kind of cloak. And he said, "Let's think about that." Well, Dean Rusk called me the next day and said he'd been talking to the President about the kind of cloak I should have and he thought I ought to take a vacation on the Isle of Rhodes with my wife. I said, "That's fine if the government's going to pay for it, but I wasn't

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planning on spending all that money to take my wife on a vacation on the Isle of Rhodes." And he said, "Well, we'll arrange it. You take your wife on this trip. Don't go by yourself. And you tell your friends you're going to the Isle of Rhodes. And then you continue on to Israel from the Isle of Rhodes. And that's just a pleasure trip and there's no particular significance attached to it." Well, just before I left the signals changed a little bit. He said "You better go to Israel first because we have to get this underway quickly and you can go to the Isle of Rhodes afterwards." Well, I then had passage for my wife so we both went. And we went to Israel. I must say I was in conference continuously for the...I guess I was there for approximately a week – continuously so it wasn't much of a vacation for me. I don't know how much of a vacation it was for my wife. But just

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on a personal note I got called by the President two or three times while I was in Israel. The phone communication is horrible between the two countries. Even when the President is calling it takes an hour to get a connection. Or even when I'd call the White House it would take that long to get a connection. And finally when I'd sent my last message saying – you know, I'll go into that – telling what I'd been able to accomplish with the Israeli government I got a telegram back, "Proceed home immediately." So I never did get to the Isle of Rhodes. But the cover story was pretty good.

STEWART: The papers said you were a guest of the Weitzman Institute of Science?

FELDMAN: Yes, yes. That's right. I visited there too. I'd have to look at the papers again. Oh yes, I remember. I said I would do that too. But

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to come back to the trip to Israel and what we did on the refugee matter. My first meeting was with Ben-Gurion and with Golda Meir. And we didn't get very far. They said that this was impossible under free choice. There wasn't any free choice.

They made most of the arguments we had anticipated or, in fact, the President had anticipated. He was really remarkable. They said that the Arabs could persuade them to vote to return to Israel and Israel would never take that. And this was so. So I cabled back the results and said that I would like instructions to reveal more of the Johnson report. I was not then authorized to reveal the Johnson report nor did I give them a copy of the Johnson report while I was there. But I did want permission to give them a part of it. And they authorized me to read to them a part of the proposed Johnson report. And that part of the report stated

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quite clearly that Israel would not be required to take more than they could readily absorb. Well, my second meeting which was with Golda dealt largely with how much could Israel take. And again she was pretty tough. Golda Meir was a very difficult person to bargain with. But at the conclusion I said that suppose that it works out that you don't get any more than you've already offered in other conversations with other people to take? I was referring to conversations they had had with Johnson. And in one of these conversations Johnson said that they had told him that they could take one tenth of the refugees, perhaps; one out of ten. Well, she denied that. She said Johnson had misunderstood some things she had said. But she was willing that I take it up with Ben-Gurion.

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So, at my second meeting with Ben-Gurion, which she also attended, we dealt largely with just what Israel would take. And finally Ben-Gurion said, "Okay. We would take one out of ten refugees if the other nine out of ten go to the Arab countries." And again I won't go into the details of the plan. They're pretty easy to find. But the key part of the plan as far as the Israeli government was concerned was what would they be required to absorb? They considered any Arabs they got as a potential fifth column. So, I cabled back that it seemed as if we could get the Israeli government to accept the Johnson plan providing they stuck to the precise language of the plan as I had given it to Golda Meir, the Foreign Minister, and to the Prime Minister of Israel.

I got back a cable from the State Department saying, "Well done. This is a good job.

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This is the most we could expect from Israel and that I should then notify Cairo that Nasser ought to be informed." I did that and I got back from Cairo a statement that Nasser had listened and didn't get too excited about it. At that point, well, we thought that there was a pretty good chance of solving the refugee problem. And when I got back to Washington...I was called back by the President, by the way, by a matter completely unrelated to this. There was some excitement in the textile industry and he wanted what I had promised on his behalf to the industry. So, when I got back we had a long talk with the President about the trip. And I finished by saying, "Well, if this goes through it seems to me you deserve a Nobel Prize because this could break the lockjam. This could be a force that would permit peace in the Middle East, something that nobody's been able to achieve

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and which many people have given their lives for.

So, we decided that Johnson would go ahead and present it at the United Nations session.

STEWART: Was the President fairly optimistic at this time?

FELDMAN: No, he still was skeptical in spite of what I told him had occurred, in spite of the non-committal reaction we had gotten. Nasser didn't say anything one way or the other. The thing that surprised me and surprised the President too was that there was no objection from Nasser based on the Israelis knowing first. This we thought would occur. But that did not occur. The President thought that his relationship to Nasser was pretty good. And he attributed that in part to the personal correspondence he had had with Nasser and which he continued to have all

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through the Administration. He wrote personal notes to Nasser and Nasser responded. He thought that that was due at least in part to the kind of mild reaction he got from him.

STEWART: Although that might be another whole topic, the correspondence. Was there anything specifically in it that you'd want to tie in?

FELDMAN: No. It was very general. In so far as the refugee problem was concerned he skirted that. He didn't discuss that at all. So let's forget about that correspondence for the time being. It was decided that it would be presented at the United Nations. Well, Johnson then met with the Israeli delegation and with some of the Arab delegations in the United Nations. Immediately after he met with the Israeli delegation I got a call from

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Golda Meir who was then in New York attending the United Nations meeting. She was livid. She said she'd very much like to see me to discuss the refugee problem with me. And I told the President about it and he said, "Go on up and talk to her about it."

So I had dinner with her one night. I went up to New York and I had dinner with her. And she told me that she had detailed reports and memorandums of our conversations. And indeed, I did too. I had copies of what I had said. And she had copies of what she had said. And they agreed pretty much. She said this was not the plan that Johnson had presented to her, the plan we had discussed. It was different from the one he was presenting to the United Nations. Under no conditions would she accept it. I talked to the President about that. And he asked me what were the differences. So I went through the plan as I presented it to them

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and the plan as Johnson presented it to the United Nations. As I remember there were sixty-two differences. I said to the President frankly....In fact, I think I wrote him a note. I wrote very few notes to President Kennedy. Almost everything was oral. But I think I wrote a note on this because I was pretty mad too. I said I thought it was disgraceful that a presidential mission would be undermined at the very time the mission was in progress. I said I didn't care for myself. And I certainly didn't consider it a matter of pride or prestige or prerogative. But it seemed to me it affected the good faith of the United States. If I'm authorized to discuss a plan with a foreign government and while I'm discussing that plan the State Department agrees to sixty-two changes in the document between the time that Johnson discussed it

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with the President and me in the Cabinet Room and the time he presented it before the United Nations. I thought Johnson had made the changes on his own. I was sore at Johnson. I later found that the State Department had made those changes; that the State Department had gotten together with Johnson while I was in Israel to, as I saw it, make the plan slightly more favorable to the Arabs because on the basis of my cable they had concluded that the Israeli government would hold still for it. We didn't want the Israeli government to understand to approve the plan. We never said, "We're going to ask you to publicly approve it." And this was the President's idea. He said the Israeli government could not afford to publicly come out and say, "We're going to take some of these refugees back." So the plan was phrased in terms of their, and I use his word, acquiescing

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in the plan. Now, when I cabled back that the Israeli government would acquiesce – probably would acquiesce....I never said they absolutely would, but it looked like they would; that they were going to hold still for it and they'd let a vote be taken in the PCC and would let it be presented to the United Nations and then go along with it. It was after that that the State Department then said, "Well, we better get the Arabs now." So they changed very, very slightly, not a great deal, just some of the language in such a way that it became less palatable to the Israeli and more palatable to the Arabs.

STEWART: Who specifically was involved in this at the State Department?

FELDMAN: Well, I think it was Strong and Talbott [Phillips Talbott]. They readily admitted this when I came back. As I say, I was sore too. And Golda showed

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it to me. I came back and I talked with the President. The President did find out what

happened. I talked to the State Department. They said, “Yes, we decided these changes didn’t really make much difference.” I said, “Well, they made enough difference so that there’s a basis for Golda saying this is not what we agreed to.” And no matter what I said to Golda after that, either at that dinner or at a latter dinner or another time when the President asked me to see her, no matter what I said to her she held firm on two points. She said number one, “This is not the plan we agreed to in Israel so you can’t hold us to that. Don’t say that we’re breaching any faith, that we’re breaking our word.” And I never did. I never said that to the President. The President never accused them of doing that. And number two, she said, “The plan

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as it is phrased now we have to object to it violently because this does not have the kind of safeguard against taking too many refugees.” No matter how many times I said to her implicit in the Plan is still that one for ten thing she’d point to the language and say, “I don’t care what the United States government tells me unofficially what they might do. I have to have the Plan recognize something along these lines. Most of the changes changed that recognition.” Although it wasn’t phrased that specifically you could read into it that the United States government would see to it that not too many were absorbed into Israel. Well, that was cut out of the plan as presented to make it more palatable to the Arabs. She said with that change – and then she went through the other changes too, which didn’t make quite as much difference....

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Then I made the argument that, “Well, you know that the Arabs aren’t going to take this anyhow. Why should you be the first to object? Your posture’s going to be bad when you do something like that.” To which she said, “Well, we will just have to risk it. This is too important to us for us to acquiesce – I still use that word – for us to acquiesce. We will object to this. We will fight this,” she said. “We will not agree to it.” So the best I could do was say, “Well, don’t say that publicly until you have to.” And she said, “Well, we won’t say it publicly but the minute this plan is surfaced we’re going to have to say that.”

Well, I went back to the President with this kind of reaction and he said, “Well, what’s the reaction of the Arab government?” I said, “Well, I don’t believe they’re going

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to take it either.” And sure enough the first people to denounce the Plan were the Arab governments. I think it was the Republic of Iraq, but I’m not sure. One of the Arab ambassadors at the United Nations rejected the Plan first. And at that point the President said, “Well, nobody’s for this. What do we do with the Plan?” And I said, “We ought to give it a decent burial.” He said, “The State Department is urging that we send it to the PCC – that’s the Johnson Plan – and let the PCC then offer it to the General Assembly as a plan by Johnson and then put all the governments on the spot. If they want to turn it down, why, then the mission is over and we have completed our work. But let’s have the United States

government be in a position to say that we've done everything that we could do on this phase of the refugee problem. And I

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said I thought that was very bad because this would put our friends in a difficult position. By our friends I meant the Israeli government, frankly. I still thought it shouldn't unnecessarily be placed in the position where they'd have to come out and denounce this United Nations plan.

So after the President asked me to come back and talk to the State Department about and talk to Adlai Stevenson. I met with Adlai in his office. Adlai called in Philip Klutznick [Philip M. Klutznick] I remember at one point in the discussion. But most of the time I discussed it with Adlai and Francis Plimpton [Frances Taylor Pearson Plimpton]. And he called Yost [Charles W. Yost] in at one point too. And we decided that what we would do was simply file the plan as a document with the PCC, but not publish it as a part of the United Nations proceedings and not make it available

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to the press or anybody else. For a good long time the press speculated about what was in the plan. And they came pretty close. I really don't believe anybody ever saw the plan. I think it was a pretty well kept secret, which is quite surprising. The only reason it was that good a secret was because the full plan was never given to any delegation. The delegation was permitted to read it, but they were not permitted to hold it. So to this day the only copy of that plan, I think, is in the United Nations Archives. And of course we have copies in our State Department because we helped draft it. But it was not made a United Nations document. It was given to the PCC. And the PCC merely reported that they had received it, but that there didn't seem to be any agreement and that therefore it couldn't serve as a viable basis for a resolution of the refugee

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question and the plan was then forgotten.

It was forgotten at least for that session. It was not forgotten by the State Department I must say, because following that session of the United Nations the State Department kept trying to revive that plan. They would try to make acceptance of the plan by Israel a condition for getting the Hawks, for instance; or a condition for getting American aid; or as a condition for the United States doing something else for Israel. I would not have undertaken...I told the President and the President agreed with me. I said, "You can't get a proud nation like Israel to accept something that they consider against their national interests by promising them either money or by promising them something they need in the way of military equipment because they just won't bargain for their

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sovereign rights.” And the President agreed with me. The State Department did not.

So for the year following every time some questions would come up about Israel, why, the State Department was likely to revive the Johnson Plan and say, “Well, let’s get them to agree to that and then we’ll go on on these other things.” I guess it’s dead now. I guess the State Department no longer refers to the Johnson Plan. But those who were in that part of the State Department – and I don’t want to name the names – still think, I believe, that they will someday revive the Johnson Plan use that as a basis for the resolution of refugees. I think they’re wrong. I believe Kennedy buried the Plan. In fact that’s the word he used when he finally got rid of it. He said, “Well, we’ve buried the Plan.” And I said, “I’m going to tell

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the Israeli government that that’s what we consider we have done.” He said, “Fine.” I think he did it very reluctantly though. He was getting different advice from me from what he was getting from the State Department, I think. I think the State Department was telling him that, “Well, the Israelis just have to make a token show of opposition. They don’t really object to it,” while I was telling him “They really object to it and will not approve it or acquiesce it.” I’m not sure that he really felt sure of what the Israeli reaction would be until the very end. And at the very end he said, “Well we killed the Plan; worked with what you thought we had to do.” And I said, “Well, shall I tell them what you said?” And he said, “Yes you tell them we buried it.”

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And this was accepted by the Israelis as evidence of a friendship that John F. Kennedy formed. So, that concluded that phase of the refugee problem.

STEWART: Were there any other attempts during the three years of finding a total resolution to the refugee problem?

FELDMAN: No, that was the only major initiative. After the Johnson Plan was buried I went over and talked to Harlan Cleveland [J. Harlan Cleveland] to see whether or not there wasn’t something that could be done. I said, “This hasn’t worked out. Let’s see if something else will work out.” And at that time he said, “Why don’t we consider seeing whether or not the host government won’t absorb the refugees with some financial assistance from the United States? The United States now pays seventy percent of the cost of the refugees. Instead of doing that we’ll pay a hundred percent of the

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cost. But instead of paying it to the refugee administration, UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees] let’s pay it directly to the host governments. Let’s pay it to Jordan and let’s pay it to Egypt, let’s pay it to Lebanon and let them then

absorb the refugees themselves. Then there'll be an incentive to them." I thought it was a pretty good plan. I asked him to develop it. We talked about it a little bit. And I talked to President Kennedy about it. President Kennedy then talked to Phil Talbott, to Dean Rusk, and I think to George Ball [George W. Ball]. But they weren't very enthusiastic about that. They said that this would raise too many problems with the Arab countries. The Arab countries would never accept this resolution of the questions. This would appear to put the United States on the side

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of the Israelis. So although this came from somebody in State, who was then Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, Harlan Cleveland, it was the State Department that gave it no encouragement. And so we did not pursue that. It's a little interesting to me, however that Teddy Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] in his hearings on refugees now seems to be coming toward that as a suggested solution. He's picking up just about where John F. Kennedy left off on this total solution. Having failed in the effort to obtain a total solution through Johnson – Johnson then went back to Carnegie – having failed in that effort the President then gave up on any attempt to use the refugees as the key to peace in the Middle East. He did not give up, though, his interest in refugees. He still considered this an important problem and

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something that we ought to do something about. Now from then on my discussion with him though dealt with narrow phases of the refugee problem. First of all we always had the problem of how much money should the United States contribute to it. He was never concerned about the amount. When I raised it with him I would say, "Although it doesn't cost us very much – I think twenty three million dollars or something like that – although it doesn't cost us very much it would be useful if we did two things; number one, direct whatever money we sent them into a particular channel. In other words, instead of having it just used for rations we could use it for vocational education or for some kind of education or training or housing or something else. And number two, perhaps we could use a part of the money anyhow to encourage – I had

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given up on the idea of those governments absorbing the refugees – to encourage those governments to take the refugees over. I don't remember discussion with him about it. I do know he accepted the idea that one, the refugee rolls ought to be corrected. That was obvious. He thought that we ought to see what we could do to correct them and see that they were accurate. Because every time he'd ask me the question of how many refugees there are I'd give him three or four answers. It depends on what you mean by the number of refugees. And pretty soon he said, "Well, we ought to get an accurate number and we ought to see that the people being supported are alive and not dead." So that was the general feeling which I tried to carry out as my job....It was my job to give instructions and try to carry out. But I

don't

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think we ever had a means of accomplishing that.

STEWART: This was all done through the UN?

FELDMAN: That's right, that's right. All I could do was transmit it and that's it. Our liaison with the UN and the White House was Arthur Schlesinger. Although I talked to Adlai directly on Israeli matters and of course Phil Klutznick when he was there was....Although he was the ECOSOC [The Economic and Social Council] I'd often ask him to use whatever influence he might have in the direction of carrying out the President's ideas. Still the regular contact was Arthur Schlesinger and Bob Komer [Robert W. Komer]. Bob Komer would get into it also. So, the President felt strongly then.

Now on the second problem of vocational education he seemed to think it was a good idea that the refugees be trained for

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something. And I think he's the one that really started this initiative of getting training funds for them rather than general funds. And we've done a little bit of that. On the third problem of providing some incentive for the host governments the only direction I had from him during this time was a feeling that perhaps something could be done for Jordan, which had most of the refugees, that would require them to have a larger labor force. Instead of having these idle people they might have something like our depressed areas legislation. I remember he used that analogy. And if Jordan had assistance along the lines of our depressed areas legislation, which is now the Economic Development Administration, then it would provide more jobs in Jordan. With new jobs they'd need more people. They'd have to go to the refugee camps. The refugee camps would then be cut down. And the host

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government would in fact be absorbing the refugees through their work force. This was a Presidential idea but it was pretty late in his Administration when we started working along that direction. So I don't think a great deal was done. In fact Jordan has improved its economy to the extent where it is using a lot of refugees. But the refugees still go back to the camps at night now. So this idea was a good one. And if we were to speculate as to what he would do under present conditions my guess is that he'd consider that the rolls ought to be rectified in such a way as to have these wage earners not considered refugees anymore. You can't tell them where to live. They can come back to their refugee camps if they want to after their day's work. But you don't consider them refugees. Let them join the general population and there'd be some rectification of the refugee rolls

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by virtue of the number of people that are employed. This was, as I say, a Kennedy idea and it didn't get very far while he was in charge. I think he also would approve the gradual reduction in the American commitment. Not because he cared. He really didn't care. Another five hundred thousand or seven hundred thousand or million dollars for refugees he thought was well worth spending. He was always very sympathetic to any refugees. And just the name attached to these people were enough to excite his sympathy. But, typically I think he looked at the larger problem. And a cut of five percent in the rolls is significant only if that five percent actually is absorbed by that host government and only if it really is a way of curing the problem, not just a way of saving money.

And that leaves only one other thing

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that we had not discussed dealing with refugees during his Administration. And that was the various motions of the United Nations dealing with them. Every year this problem arose when each government was asked to contribute to the refugees. And each year when this motion was presented to the United Nations the Arabs would make the repeating motions which would call for a property custodian for the refugees – and I don't want to describe the property custodian concept because I'm sure you're familiar with it – or in stronger language a request that the refugees be returned to their homes or a reconstitution of the Palestine Conciliation Commission. These were the three basic amendments they normally presented at the United Nations. And each time we'd have to take up with the President what he was going to do on the Arab motions. The President's idea was to

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avoid a direct confrontation with the Arab nations. He was skeptical as to whether or not we'd win because they had considerable strength. He didn't think it was necessary. And so long as we didn't have any overall solution to the refugee problem I think his policy was to try to keep things on an even keel. "Let's just not disturb the situation as it is now until we have a breakthrough of some kind." So each time it came up the strategy became....The strategy was normally recommended to him first by Adlai Stevenson. And then it would go through the State Department. And then it would come to the White House. Everybody would get a crack at it before it got to him. What would happen is that Adlai would say this motion was coming up and this is what we propose. The State Department would go over it and normally we'd have

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a meeting over in the State Department attended by all the people concerned: Komer and myself from the White House. Schlesinger did not attend them. Schlesinger did not get into any of the substantive aspects. He was a liaison. He was a conduit. He was not somebody who filled the pipeline with information or ideas. So we'd have a meeting at the State

Department. And then the product of that meeting would come over to the White House. And Komer and I if we disagreed would send competing notes to the President or meet with the President at different times – not at different times, together with different views. Usually we'd meet with him at night one or two times at the critical period before the United States had to take its position. And in each instance the President would resolve all the conflicting advice he received by this policy of saying, "Well,

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let's just get over this without hurting anybody's feeling." The way to do it in each instance was an American resolution. Each of the years that he was President when this resolution came before the United Nations there was an American resolution that took kind of the middle ground. And the United States said, "We won't take any amendment. We reject both the Israeli and the Arab amendments." Now the major Israeli amendment which again led to considerable fuss and I suppose we have to discuss this at our next session. The major American amendment was an amendment which called for direct peace negotiations. I mean not the major American amendment; the major Israeli amendment. The major Israeli amendment was one which called for direct negotiations for peace between the Arabs and the Israelis. That was always a tough

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one to oppose. And the first time it came up it resulted in considerable uproar in the American-Jewish community because they thought the United States was opposing what seemed like an obvious thing. We could call for direct negotiations between India and Pakistan and we did support a resolution to that effect in the United Nations. Why not support a resolution calling for direct negotiations between the Arabs and the Israelis? It's a hard position to understand except in the context of a parliamentary situation. The first time it came up we actually had to vote on it. Not only vote on it, we lobbied against having this accepted as an amendment to our resolution for the continuation of UNRWA. And we got a lot of unfavorable publicity as a result of that.

Every time after that we were successful in

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not having to vote on that issue. The second time we got the Israelis to withdraw their amendment. And the third time we had a substitute which everybody then agreed to and the Israelis didn't bring it up at all. But I still believe that our tactics were best. And this was a decision which the President made in each instance. I remember some people in the press said that the President didn't know about this and that he was unaware of what was happening. That wasn't true. He was aware of everything that was happening; though it went through this elaborate process before it got to him. And then we actually had meetings on it. But he felt that the best strategy was to say we would not accept any amendments to our resolution. And that way we were able to vote against them all without expressing to either the Arabs or the Israelis

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an antagonistic position. In a sense we preserved an appearance of neutrality. I say “an appearance of neutrality” because we really weren’t neutral and I don’t believe anybody ought to be kidded about that.

We thought that in almost each instance the Israelis refugee motions were appropriate and that the Arab refugee motions were not. We also had commitments to Israel which we’ll go into in another session which made it important that we prevent any outright conflict between the two. Otherwise the United States would be involved. So all of our policies were directed toward maintaining this uneasy balance between the two forces. And the refugee problem was one of the problems we had to exercise our judgment in an effort to keep to that policy.

STEWART: What about when Dr. Davis [John H. Davis] who was the head of UNRWA resigned at the end of 1963? Was there any...I think he mentioned the

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lack of funds for vocational training among other things than ended his work.

FELDMAN: Well, I think that was more an excuse than a reason. The funds for vocational training he could have gotten as I said before. Kennedy would support anything like that, and I’m sure that we could have gotten the United Nations to support it. But Davis lost all his effectiveness. One year after we were in the White House we knew that Davis was a pretty ineffective director. He lost all of his effectiveness because he did not enjoy the support of both the Arabs and the Israelis. The Israelis complained that in all the time he was director he never once visited Israel to ask them about their views on refugees while he visited every Arab capital many times to talk about refugees. So they felt that they didn’t have anybody they could talk to. Secondly the Israelis

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always objected to the reports that he published every year on the refugees because they always had language in them that the Arabs found satisfactory, and indeed encouraging, while they didn’t have the same kind of things for the Israelis. Now the President knew about that and the President – oh I guess after my mission in 1962 – in talking about Dr. Davis asked me how I viewed his effectiveness. And I said that I thought that we could do better. And he said he was sure that we could, but how do you get somebody else? So, Davis must have felt this. And I think that he had lost the confidence of the superiors of the United Nations. There were constant complaints about him. And in view of all that I think he decided to resign and then looked for an excuse for it.

STEWART: Did you have any role to play in picking his successor?

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FELDMAN: No, I did not. I knew about it before he was appointed. But that's all. I did not select him and I did not approve him or anything.

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