

**James C. Thomson Jr. Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 6/13/1980**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** James C. Thomson Jr.  
**Interviewer:** Sheldon Stern  
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**Biographical Note**

Thomson was a speech writer and assistant to Chester B. Bowles and others at the State Department Foreign Service Office in Far Eastern Affairs, (1961-1965), and later became an East Asian specialist at Harvard and a professor emeritus of history, journalism, and international relations at Boston University. In this interview, he discusses Roger Hilsman's 1963 speech on firm policies towards China, the changing approaches to foreign policy in Southeast Asia between the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and the conflicting ideologies on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

James C. Thomson Jr.

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James C. Thomson Jr.—JFK #3

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Third Oral History Interview

with

James C. Thomson, Jr.

June 13, 1980  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Sheldon Stern

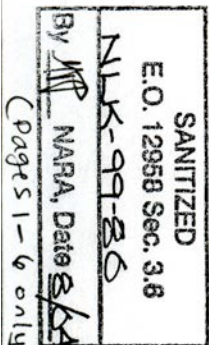
For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Most of the last session was on China policy during the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] Administration and the last points we discussed were [REDACTED] the build-up of the mainland in 1962, the military build-up. Then at some length we discussed the food-for-China issue and just how that in a sense fit into the divisions within the administration. And we concluded talking about the Sino-Indian war in the fall of 1962. My next question had to do with the attempt to open the—to achieve a passport opening to China during the Kennedy Administration, another one of these “camels’ noses” as you called them. I wonder what you could recall about that?

THOMSON: Well, I think I mentioned way back that in the first weeks of 1962 there had been a Policy-Planning meeting on the Sino-Soviet split, at which someone named Mose Harvey [Mose L. Harvey] had prepared a long paper, and it seemed to open minds to the existence of the Sino-Soviets. But a year prior to that in the first months of '61, I had found a survivor

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of sorts from the China purges, buried in Policy Planning: Edward Rice [Edward E. Rice] who had been in all—as I read some of his output with astonishment since it was so—it



argued for flexibility and innovation. As I probed who he was, he had been....And I began to say, in all the wrong places at the wrong times: Chungking, under Patrick Hurley [Patrick J. Hurley], on an early visit to Chinese communists in their caves. Washington, with John Carter Vincent, et cetera, et cetera. How on earth, I asked him, had he survived? And it turned out that for reasons very obscure to him—he's now retired on the West Coast and somewhere along the way he wrote a good biography or account of Mao Tse Tung, a big fat book. Unbeknownst to him and for reasons unknown to him, General Hurley—Ambassador Hurley—who was really the chief originator of the China witch hunt from '45 onward—in the charges he hurled against the foreign services officers, had dropped into Ed Rice's file a letter saying that this man is first rate, don't touch him. And every time some investigator got into the Ed Rice file, all the way from Senate committees on through Scott McLeod [Robert Walter Scott McLeod] in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] era, they came upon the Hurley letter and put away the file. This at least is Ed Rice's account. He is also a man of great caution, despite his ability even as late as '61 to put on paper thoughts that would have been, I would have thought, anathema to John Foster Dulles, Walter Robertson [Walter S. Robertson] and J. Graham Parsons [James Graham Parsons] who were the boys who had

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been basically running China policy, the latter two in particular. Anyway, a long paper by Ed Rice which should exist in the archives or at least be found, was floating around the Policy Planning Bureau and upper echelons; it was highly classified in the early weeks of '61 and was discussed at least once in a Policy Planning meeting—Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] taking a long view—if he was there at the time. Which I think he wasn't. I think it was George McGhee [George C. McGhee] sort of taking a long view and saying this is interesting but most people thinking of course it was purely academic. The paper I would style as a laundry list of possible options we might take towards China. A brainstorming laundry list with every conceivable kind of option from pretty hard stuff like perhaps taking out their nukes all the way to sending them food and drugs, and opening trade. Early in the list of feelers—feeler-type soft initiatives—was the matter of loosening up travel toward China. An issue on which a lot of us felt inside before we came—particularly outsiders coming in with Kennedy—we felt very strongly that one way to hold out the hand of possible accommodation was to hold out the possibility of learning from each other by allowing travel in both directions regardless of what the Chinese did, at least ease our travel ban, which had been put into effect during the Korean war, in which Dulles had only grudgingly modified very slightly for journalists when the Chinese issued an invitation

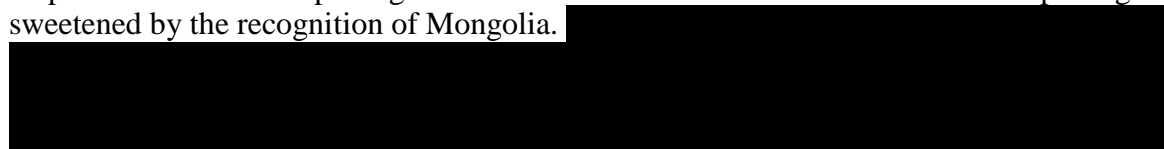
[-3-]

in the late '50s, after which the Chinese became rather rigid themselves. So despite that one opening for journalist travel on the books, all else was barred. There then was cooked—cooking and regularly produced—something called the China travel package, down in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs among the more liberal China watchers of which there were very few in the first year of the new administration. The China travel package, however, did find its way with prompting from our office and elsewhere at regular intervals up through the

clearance process to the Secretary of State's [Dean Rusk] desk where it would usually sit for some days and even weeks. And when the China desk would begin to get itchy about inaction on the China travel package—it had many options within it: one was travel only for certain kinds of people, doctors and nurses in addition to reporters or certain experts in the humane fields of technology such as agricultural sciences. There were, as I said, a number of options. Whenever the China desk got itchy and would ask, "Please what's going on in the Secretary's office," one of the Secretary's more enlightened people—perhaps Luke Battle [Lucius D. Battle] would nudge Mr. Rusk and say, "By the way, this paper sir on China travel" and Rusk in a very shrewd fashion would regularly look at it and say, "Oh that's quite out of date now isn't it." And have it sent back to be updated, retyped, and have new information added—there must be new information.

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This travesty, this amazingly successful delaying process, I would say recurred five or six times in the years '61 through '65. It was sometimes once a year, sometimes twice a year, sometimes three times a year. It had attached to it as a sometimes completely separate thing and sometimes sort of, a codicil, a proposal for the recognition of Mongolia. Which—I have discussed that before—which was a different kind of signaling action also proposed by the good guys in the Far East Bureau. And sometimes its presence complicated the China travel package because Mr. Rusk didn't like the idea of recognizing Mongolia and sometimes it helped the China travel package because certain other folks felt the China travel package was sweetened by the recognition of Mongolia.



STERN:   


THOMSON: What was that?

STERN: All you would hear was a few sheep and some—what was the national animal?

THOMSON: The yak.

STERN: The yak, right.

THOMSON: A yawning yak, right. To put it briefly the purpose of Mongolian recognition, for some of us at least, was to demonstrate that we were not totally rigid on some, and

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even racist, on some force called Asian communism. That as long as we were willing to deal on a restricted but formal diplomatic basis with Eastern European communist countries and the Soviet Union that—and as long as we said we would judge countries by their behavior and that China was a no no because of its threatening behavior—here was poor old Mongolia, an Asian communist country whose behavior was in no sense threatening and which the nation eventually signed the international Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Therefore, what better example of meaning what we said so that we could have decent, normal relations with Asian communist nations. That was precisely why Mr. Rusk objected strongly to the Mongolia package separate from the China package because he didn't want to get that point across at all. He was much more set in his ways and the need to show that he would accept basically no communism in Asia. There was, deep in the recesses of his mind, I think, some concept of eventual rollback or at least the inevitable collapse of communism in Asia. Anyway, when you mentioned China travel, I have to think immediately of Mongolia because they often did come in tandem. All I can tell you is, first of all, that I have written about this travel package at great length in a long article in *China Quarterly*—blow by blow, step by step, using my own papers and other peoples papers as a small case study in the problems we faced in the—what I call the Rusk years under Kennedy and Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] on any China initiatives. The Secretary was

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successful until the autumn—until the summer of 1965 when a new element entered the picture. I don't know if you want me to go into that yet.

STERN:               Why don't we hold off on that simply because...

THOMSON:           All I will say is that as a result of the completely unexpected letter from Dr. Paul Dudley White to Lyndon Johnson we were able to, although it took us six months to amend the travel ban by December '65. Out flank Mr. Rusk and permit specialists in medicine and public health to have passports valid for travel to the Peoples Republic of China and be regarded as an astonishing victory.

STERN:               Speaking of...

THOMSON:           The mountain brought forth a mouse.

STERN:               Speaking of out-flanking Mr. Rusk, I wonder if we could go into some detail of the origins of the Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] speech, the December '63 speech. Both in terms of—well first how did the notion of giving the speech originate? How was it assigned and written? And I'm particularly interested in the process by which it was approved, reviewed I should say by people like William Sullivan [William H. Sullivan] and George Ball [George W. Ball] and whether or not it was reviewed by Rusk.



THOMSON: Well again, I have written about that subject in the same article I cited. I am none the less in my memory as it comes out— the written page is far better than my memory will be today. So if I contradict myself— contradict what I have said earlier in writing, please believe what I said in writing because at that point I had documents in front of me. After I had joined Hilsman in July of '63—

[Sound of three thumps]

the tape should know that a large ant has departed for another life. [Laughter] One of the things that was on Hilsman's mind in the summer

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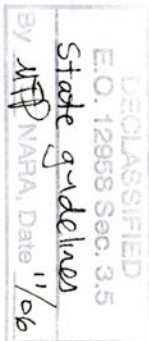
of '63, when he brought me aboard was the possibility—his desire at some point to give a speech—a full-dress speech—on China policy. Since none had been given since, I believe J. Graham Parsons in '59 and Walter Robertson in '57. A full-dress speech in which a new American approach to China might be annunciated very broadly. A speech in which, as he eventually phrased it in describing the speech and this language, may have been in the December 1<sup>st</sup> final in which we would annunciate the policy of firmness, flexibility, and dispassion.

STERN: Those were your words weren't they.

THOMSON: Well, Hilsman said at the Kennedy [JFK Presidential Library] opening that they were my words and I had thought they were his words so it's one of those things one doesn't really know anymore. None the less, he and I concurred and had a common view that those three words summarized where we should be at in our public stance. Firmness meant containment, continued containment of any real possibility of aggression, though he and I were both of the view pushed by our China expert friends Allen Whiting [Allen S. Whiting] and others on the inside, and by historians like Fairbank [John K. Fairbank] on the outside, that China basically does not have aggressive intent—offensive intentions— and that China was basically an inner directed power. None the less from this and for PR [public relations] reasons as well as realpolitik. Flexibility probably being the central word. A policy of unilateral—a gradual annunciation of and enactment of unilateral initiatives towards China. The Ed Rice laundry list, which items have been discussed at infinitum for a few years now— was a way of signaling to the Chinese that we did not intend to keep on a track of eternal enmity and a policy, incidentally, we applauded

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or promoted because we felt there could be no genuine peace in Asia until the U.S. and China found some form of accommodation if not détente. Reconciliation being a third possible word. And finally dispassion. That third element promotes a desire to move away from the polemics of the '49 to '61 period: both polemics towards the Chinese and polemics within



the American political system, the aftermath of McCarthyism. Roger had mulled over giving such a speech and had asked the normal speech writer in the bureau, a very bright and reactionary guy, a Foreign Service officer named Calvin [Maylord?] to do a first draft since that was his normal function and he had hoped to give such a speech, I believe, in September in San Francisco or in Hawaii I cannot remember which it was. Summer being heavily preoccupied—our attention being taken up initially with Indonesia and Indochina. Vietnam the post—the Buddhist riots and the like and the intensifying combat with Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and his brother Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu]. The China project kept leaping to the back burner and by the time the September speech date came along and Mr. Maylord's draft had emerged from the inner recesses of the bureau, Hilsman felt strongly and I concurred that the draft said precisely the opposite of what Hilsman intended and was a perpetuation of the old Dulles policy in the world's worst boiler-plate. It was actually, I think, better written than most boiler-plates but the content was grossly at odds with our purpose. It was then that he thought too late to try to redraft and so, meanwhile, Indochina had become even more of a crisis. The August

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telegram, the coup efforts—the multiple coup discussions, the discussion of whether or not to—what kind of pressures to put on Diem. In this climate, Hilsman abruptly decided that we would wait for another occasion. And the next one that came along the pike, despite and in the midst of the heightening crisis with Saigon, was a San Francisco speech scheduled December 13<sup>th</sup>. To what organization was it, do you remember?

STERN:           No I don't.

THOMSON:        You don't remember. It was a very sort of elite foreign policy big luncheon. So on and off during the autumn—as that date approached, Lindsey Grant, a much more enlightened China desk officer, was asked to do a basic first draft of a China speech and Mr. [Maylord?] was discreetly shoved aside. And it was in the FE [Far Eastern] Public Affairs office and Lindsey Grant was on the mainland China desk itself. Grant was chugging away at a draft also; also in on the discussions of that draft were Allen Whiting in INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research, State Department] whose input was considerable. Robert Barnett [Robert W. Barnett] who had come in as one of Hilsman's deputies by then, I believe, the economic Deputy Assistant Secretary, who was another China survivor. He had spent ten years in the wilderness because his name had been mentioned several times on the Hill and he had been grilled in executive sessions but he was not kicked out; he was merely sent to the low countries for ten years—a kind of exile. Benelux, various posts there. But had been rehabilitated and brought back by George Ball and Harriman [W. Averell Harriman]. I would say Grant, Whiting,

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and Barnett and I were the four draftsmen of that—of the eventual speech. And I would give

the greatest credit to Lindsey Grant. Hilsman tends to give it to me which I think is inaccurate, though flattering. There ensued, of course, the terrible dual assassinations of Diem and of Kennedy. In the aftermath of our President's death, as we tried to keep working in a state of shock, Hilsman wondered, I think, whether such a speech could still be given. But he had convinced himself that this is what Kennedy had wanted—such a pronouncement—and that Kennedy had in very general terms approved of the potential content of such a speech. We know from conversations since from the panel that we had last autumn, from Hilsman's own book that the assurances he received from Kennedy are somewhat fuzzy. Let's say the instructions he received from Kennedy are quite fuzzy. But I think that may have characterized Kennedy on a number of subjects—many presidents, Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] onward.

STERN: Right. I suspect he encouraged him. Thus giving him the impression...

THOMSON: At the same time, he would nod and grunt when Dean Rusk would say something along quite different lines, that's how some presidents—maybe most of them—act. So Hilsman, I think, felt an increased obligation almost in the aftermath of Kennedy's death to carry out this assignment and as something of a historian he felt it was essential to leave that mark despite what must have been his great uncertainty about the new President's [Johnson] stand on this issue since the new President had early in '61, I believe—or sometime along there in '62—passed through Taiwan and made extravagant statements about that regime as well as about Diem. The draft that emerged once in Hilsman's hands and

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touched up to meet his requirements was, I thought at the time, quite a fine statement. I have not reread it and I think if I were to reread it, I would be rather shocked at its leftover cold warisms. Put out in part because of the climate of the time and even in our heads our perceptions of China were still of a potentially very hostile force. Chinese language toward us—Chinese rhetoric—was not softening at all. It intensified after Kennedy's death. That angered Harriman profoundly that they—rather—their glee, Chinese glee—the phrase, “Kennedy bites the dust.” A Chinese phrase that's almost a pun on the name Kennedy. And it was at Harriman's insistence that somewhere at the end of the speech or toward the end of the speech we lashed out at the Chinese for having been tasteless about the death of our President. None the less, I was quite proud of that document and Hilsman was pleased and I was asked to be responsible for its clearance. I would put the end of the story at the beginning, a brief account of the clearance process by saying that if that speech had been properly and fully cleared it would never have been given. Not many things in government are properly and fully cleared. That means getting the principal as opposed to his chief deputy to read the whole damn thing with enough time to thrust himself into commentary and critiquing, and life is too busy normally and it was especially busy that month for the principals involved. So I would say no one at the highest levels, and I will give you the names, actually read the document until the morning it was being given in California.

STERN: You include Sullivan, Ball, no one.

THOMSON: I will now give you some names. I sent a copy over to Mike

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Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] at the White House for clearance. Mike, I believe, mentioned it to Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy]. Mike read it, called me up and said, "James, I'm ashamed of you." And I said, "What on earth do you mean?" He said, "This speech says nothing, it goes nowhere. It's the same old stuff. You should have been much more bold." I said, "Well look, I think it really is a beginning." He said, "Well, I really hoped for more and as far as I'm concerned you have our clearance." I said, "White House clearance?" He said, "Yes, no problem." Another copy was sent up to Bill Sullivan for Averell Harriman. Sullivan read it. Harriman, I believe, was out of town. Sullivan called back and said, "Yes this is fine. It has the Governor's clearance. I'm giving it to you for him." I don't know if he read the thing at all. All I know is that he had the Harriman clearance through Sullivan. As for the Secretary of State, he was on his way to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] to a meeting and Hilsman asked for fifteen minutes with the Secretary of State. He came up with the document in hand. I came up at the end of that meeting, to bring him some additional pieces of paper he needed. Rusk stood at the desk as Hilsman sat at the desk. From what Roger told me and from what I heard, the Secretary of State said, "What's this I hear about maybe de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] recognizing Red China?" and Roger said, "Well, sir we don't know for sure. It's certainly a possibility." Rusk said, "Well, I wouldn't want to say anything to encourage him to do that. I hope the speech doesn't do that." And Roger said, "No sir, it really argues for a policy of firmness. Very firm. Plus,

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you know, some flexibility in urging that we be dispassionate toward China." The Secretary leafed through it, not reading it. He was sort of turning the pages and said—he looked at his watch—and said, "I guess that's all right." He had to leave. He did not even keep a copy. He gave the copy back to Roger and within a half an hour was on his way to the airport. So we had Mr. Rusk's clearance. George Ball thereupon became acting Secretary of State by the next morning when Hilsman was in California delivering the speech or maybe it was a day later. The timing is a little rough in my head. George Ball, I believe, missed out on the clearance procedure because when at the Secretary's staff meeting, which he chaired on the day that the advance notice was coming out on the content of the speech, George Ball said, "Who on earth cleared this?" Hilsman was in San Francisco. The Secretary was at NATO. Harriman may or may not have had his hearing aid on. Luke Battle or someone was able to say, "The Secretary cleared it himself. Just before leaving for NATO." And George Ball was a bit surprised. But after all Rusk had cleared it and it did have White House clearance. I dutifully reported it to Roger who reported it to Luke Battle or whoever was in charge that the White House had cleared it. I believe that is the end of the clearance story except that on the day of and the day after, Mr. Harriman went through the ceiling for reasons obscure to

me. I think Mr. Sullivan suddenly was off on vacation or out of town conveniently. Michael Forrestal called in FE Public Affairs—no, he called into Roger’s front office to say that if anyone

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asks whether this speech had White House clearance, say it didn’t.

STERN: Oh, my God.

THOMSON: Because, apparently either Mac Bundy or the President said, “What’s all this about.” So Michael had heard that rumble, distant thunder, not so distant, and reversed course. We never gave ourselves the opportunity, we never found the opportunity to say that this speech did not have White House clearance. We marched onward along the lines “that were proper in terms of the assurance I’ve received.”

STERN: Just for the record let me add on point, since you mentioned the Cold War rhetoric which was in the speech. The four basic points which were covered in the speech that were closed: recognition of Mongolia, lifting of travel restrictions, easing of trade restrictions, and the inclusion of China in the Geneva disarmament talks. All of those points had been in Bowles’ [Chester B. Bowles] memos for years and actually some other...

THOMSON: Chester Bowles.

STERN: Yes, right. Internal memos. Had been suggested for a very long time.

THOMSON: Oh sure. This is an end product of the internal liberal democratic mafia which had talked for months and years and had never got anywhere. Roger was their most recent instrument and I was a helpmate. But it was part of our conventional wisdom—a conventional wisdom that had never until that moment prevailed even in rhetoric, much less action. What then happened—the speech was\_ because Congress was out of town. And there was a decent

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interval in which to wait for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. The other shoe was the press. We kept very close tabs on press reaction throughout the country. And to our great pleasure, even to my surprise though we had always told each other the country was ahead of us on this matter. There were polls indicating greater flexibility than the government believed. I was able to put together editorials from a very disparate group of newspapers including what I would call the beefy right wing: right and middle wing Republican traditional papers like the *Toledo Blade* and the Omaha this and that. There were a lot of papers outside of let’s say

the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *L.A. Times*, Minneapolis, Chicago, Marshall Field's [Marshall Field Jr.] papers, which wrote editorials saying, "Isn't Mr. Hilsman right and isn't this finally sanity or rationality reappearing in our China policy." Firmness yes and flexibility yes. And also of course dispassion. We had too long been irrational on this subject. What a reasonable thing to say. The applause was virtually unanimous from the widest possible spectrum of the press. I was only shocked and dismayed that my uncle who was the editor of the *Hartford Courant*— which is sort of a good rank and file, middle of the road Republican newspaper in Connecticut— wrote an editorial saying precisely what Michael Forrestal had said to me. Why so little? Why so late? Why so feeble? And I was enraged that he would not know, being a very wise man, what agony we'd gone through just to produce this little mouse.

STERN:           What about the Chinese response? I saw and INR study which suggested on the whole that Hilsman was satisfied. That they had

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been—I can use the quote, "cautious and light-footed." Which was regarded as being somewhat encouraging.

THOMSON:       I think we felt the Chinese were very moderately responsive. Let's say very modestly responsive. They had the tendency to denounce most of what we said at the time anyway. So, it was within—their response was favorable within a very narrow framework of responsiveness. They were always looking for condescension on our part and for instance when medical travel two years later was finally announced, the Chinese, as I recall, were thoroughly vitriolic in noting our condescension in that regard. Saying they didn't need our folks. They can handle their own sick people and public health problems. So we were always walking a thin line, looking as if we were indulging in cultural imperialism. There was one unfortunate phrase that I think Allen Whiting put into that speech. It did not have lasting effect over the years, but towards the end when Hilsman summarizes our policy by saying it is the "open door": an open door to any willingness to etc. etc., hands across the sea stuff.

STERN:           I'm surprised nobody caught that.

THOMSON:       I'm surprised we didn't catch it because I now know more about the open door—I know more about the open door in the years since, than I guess I did at the time. It's not a phrase that has warmed the hearts of Chinese over some fifty years. It was a misplaced American myth that was probably done for self congratulatory purposes. So that's the story of that speech as I can recall it. In greater detail you'll see it in the article that I cited.

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STERN: I found some fascinating documents in your papers which were called “Summaries” which were written on November 22, 1963. These were summaries of Asian issues for the new President and the date suggested they were written on the very day of the assassination. The one on China, for example, and I’m quoting now, said that, “The new President must be resolute against the ruthlessly aggressive regime in China and reassure our allies that he will follow the course charted by President Kennedy.” Do you have any idea who wrote these? Who was thinking in that kind of an atmosphere to sit down and write these kinds of things?

THOMSON: First of all I don’t recall the document. I’m not sure if I even saw it. Second, it must have been an immediate demand that afternoon to produce for the White House that evening from each bureau a “where are we at this minute”— something’s blinking.

STERN: It means the tape is about to end.

THOMSON: Let me heat up this would you like anything?

[END OF SIDE ONE]

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[BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE]

THOMSON: Before we go back to the summaries of November 22—I want to add one thing about the Hilsman China speeches. A small point but it again shows how lapses occurred in bureaucratic procedures. It was a great—it was with great dismay that I discovered the day of the Hilsman speech, that somehow Mr. Hilsman’s chief deputy, Ed Rice, father of the China laundry list, who was therefore that day the acting Assistant Secretary for Far East because Hilsman was out in California, had never seen the speech at any stage of its preparation.

STERN: Not deliberately, obviously.

THOMSON: He was not deliberately excluded from the process. It was somehow so closely held by such a small group of drafters that he was never let in on the process. And I think it hurt him deeply or should have; he was a man who covered his feelings normally. But he was also ill equipped to answer the bosses upstairs who were shouting about how this damn thing had happened. It was,

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I think, pure oversight except that Hilsman and he were not very close, point one, and point two, he had special responsibilities for other regions of the bureau at times of crisis when

Hilsman was deeply involved in either Vietnam or in this case the China speech. But I wanted to make that point for the record.

STERN: That's very interesting.

THOMSON: The summaries of November 22<sup>nd</sup> are unknown of their origin. Their origins are unknown to me. I assume that an edict came down from the seventh floor saying each bureau must put together at once for the current President, as brief as possible, a statement on where we stand on every important policy issue within your region. That the China desk within FE used...boiler plate completely out of kilter with what was about to be said three weeks later...

STERN: That's what is so interesting about it.

THOMSON: ...by Hilsman. But in that moment of shock, that day of shock, it was certainly, I assume, no time at which to bother the new President with impending initiatives. It was no time to stick your neck out with an unknown president whose stance on communism, particularly Asian communism, was fairly clear or seemed to have been to that point. And so it was partly addressed to the reader, to one's perceptions to who the reader was—I'm giving you my top of the head reaction.

STERN: Right, right.

THOMSON: It's partly a "we're not rocking the boat," boss type operation.

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The word ruthless, which Hilsman has always pronounced, rŭthless, makes me think that he perhaps had a hand in that paragraph. But, I know that he felt very insecure with the Vice President who had suddenly become President and perhaps he was going out of his way to show his West Point [U.S. Military Academy] manhood and Texan origins. He somehow was born in Texas, I think. That was a point he tried to remind and to let Johnson be reminded of.

STERN: I wonder if you would be willing just briefly at least to sum up your general assessment of the Kennedy Administration, particularly of JFK, on the whole question of China and in doing that to also add whether or not your own view of that has changed in the last fifteen years. In other words, how you felt about it then when the Kennedy Administration ended, and how you feel about it now? Has it changed in any demonstrable way?

THOMSON: At the time of Kennedy's nomination, we who had been Stevensonians in '52 and '56 and were more naturally I suppose Stevensonian and Humphrite [Adlai E. Stevenson and Hubert H. Humphrey]. In '60, I knew



that the President did not come out of this—the nominee and the President-Elect did not come out of this wing of the party. I knew that his brother [Robert F. Kennedy] had some McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] relationships. I knew something about his father's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] past. I felt we were dealing therefore with someone who would have to be pulled and pushed along on the Asia initiatives that

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we hoped the country could take. But I felt he was smart, malleable, not stuck in his ways and he had some people around him who could be especially useful to us. I think that within a very few weeks of the new administration coming into power, we'd begun to discover, particularly in the summer of '61, a major obstacle at home, namely at State, in the person of the Secretary of State. He would have been a fairly anonymous fellow, in terms of our knowledge of where he stood on the things that we cared about and he turned out again with these efforts, small efforts of initiatives, China travel and Mongolia, to be an increasingly large road block. Our efforts to circumnavigate him involved a search for allies—allies who could give us more clout at the White House and help our viewpoint to prevail over there and to get the Secretary of State to be knocked into shape by presidential power. Within that framework of bureaucratic infighting and the search for allies we did find—by we I mean people like Bowles and Hilsman. We found an ally in Averell Harriman, no great surprise. In Michael Forrestal, once he arrived at the White House in early '62, and in Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] to the extent that he could be pulled into foreign affairs. In Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.] to the extent that he could make any policy input. And in a number of lower level, but very informed and smart people like Allen Whiting and Tom Hughes [Thomas L. Hughes] from time to time. Although, Tom had

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no great China fondness and stood his distance from such matters. Watching the world always as an ironic Passion play—more funny than Passion plays normally are. This cluster of people searching for allies found, oh and I would include Bob Barnett in that list too and George Ball from time to time, though he was much more Eurocentric. When he came around to saying that Vietnam was bad as so many had pointed out—bad policy—he said so basically because he thought it distracted us from our Atlantic alliance—commitments. He and his critique were therefore—so many have said rather discounted because everyone knew that he was in love with Jean Monnet and that was why he thought Indochina didn't count. We settled in that we found consolation in very small victories and we found endless frustration in the battle to get anything done. The speech therefore seemed to us an extraordinary breakthrough. The decision to—this is not China related—the decision to get tough with Diem seemed to us a kind of victory. Though it had a tragic outcome. Why was so little accomplished none the less? Well, because we didn't get the President's ear and clout engaged in this particular issue—China policy. Why didn't we? I think the reasons are self-evident and often have been stated. The President was in no mood to move in on the most polemically controversial—poisonously controversial—

issue of the 1950's in the first months and in the first years of his first term. His margin of victory had been very slim and both Eisenhower and Nixon as I recall had warned him, especially Eisenhower, that they would tolerate no movement on this matter. The general would come out of retirement and denounce us. There was fear of the remnants of the China lobby on Capitol Hill. I think they were always, their power was always overstated. Senator Thomas Dodd [Thomas J. Dodd] in the summer of '61 was able to destroy the Mongolia initiative because—Bill Jordan [William J. Jordan] of the *New York Times* got a front page leak that we were considering such a move. Senator Dodd went through the roof on that and also by accident Owen Lattimore was visiting Mongolia...

STERN:           At the time

THOMSON:       ...that was all that was needed to link the Mongolia package with McCarthy-McCarranism [Patrick A. McCarran] and Tom Dodd was a real McCarranite if not McCarthyite of the old school. There were others leftover like Bourke Hickenlooper [Bourke B. Hickenlooper] who made growling noises on the subject. So the presidential margin of victory, the Eisenhower threat, the apparent remnants of the China lobby on the Hill, all, as I intuit, made Kennedy disinclined to do anything heroic or innovative on this terribly touchy issue, as the Hilsman speech demonstrated. At least by '63, the public

and its press, and even Congress, once back in session in January, showed a far greater responsiveness than many would have predicted. Hilsman and I felt it was there all along. So did Bowles. Kennedy, I think, would have had to have it shown to him and had he lived it would have been shown to him. None the less, one is assured that he has basically put China on ice until a larger victory and a second term. At that point one is assured or hopes that he'd been quite willing to move step by step toward some kind of accommodation.

STERN:           Has your view changed on this issue at all in the last decade or decade and a half?

THOMSON:       Has my view changed?

STERN:           On Kennedy's basic stand on China and the Far East in general? I'm referring, I think, essentially to many of the new left's critiques who basically depict Kennedy as nothing more than an extension of the whole Cold War ethic of the '50s. I just wonder if that has...

THOMSON:       Well, we were all extensions of our pasts. And some of us grew over the years and our views developed and changed. Some of us didn't. Seems to me that the Kennedys showed a growth potential—

Robert's extraordinary—changes over the years. Edward [Edward M. Kennedy] has been more consistent since he grew up later in life. In a different era. My impression was that Jack Kennedy was a very pragmatic fellow. And the '50s had left their mark on him. In the late '40s he'd given at least one dreadful speech accusing foreign

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service officers and others, and Professor Lattimore, and I think Professor Fairbank. Appropriately, I believe it was in Salem, Massachusetts, where they used to have witches; he accused them of losing China. Congressional candidate Kennedy—do you know that speech?

STERN: No, it's news to me.

THOMSON: Famous speech. Well noted in that early biography by James McGreggor Burns.

STERN: Oh, of course, Burns talks about that, that's right. I remember now.

THOMSON: But he had grown. He had moved on and it's my view that as times changed, he would change. If he had any problem it was super-pragmatism, reflected in his right hand fellow there, McGeorge Bundy. It was a lack of a cinder board or keel or a gyroscope. So that pragmatism would lurch in one direction or another depending on—I don't know how to pursue the metaphor—wind changes. There was no coherent scheme of values to which—an overarching value structure—to which pragmatic decisions were either consciously or unconsciously to be related. But I think that's a defect that would have cured itself as he grew up in public. His problem, as with his younger brother Robert, was growing up in public.

STERN: I think back at the conference last Fall, you used the term, that you would give Kennedy an A- for intentions and a C for results. Does that pretty much sum up your point of view?

THOMSON: Well, I would say B+ rising towards an A- for intentions.

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One hopes that his intentions were improving. The famous American University speech was a different Kennedy from the inaugural—from the tougher portions, the more strident portions of the inaugural address. That change in attitude toward the relations with the Soviet block and the Soviet Union could have and would have, I'm sure, been reflected in a similar growth on the China question. So B+ rising to A- for intentions and what did I say, C for results.

STERN: C for results.

THOMSON: C for results in my region, wherever my region may be. East Asia and Southeast Asia. C moving toward C- in Indochina though that's an area we can't fully judge, except for the Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield] and O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] assertions.

STERN: We're about to get to that. Let me just ask you one more question before we move on to Vietnam.

THOMSON: Yeah, we still have Vietnam to go.

STERN: How much time do you have?

THOMSON: I have a 1:30 lunch.

STERN: Alright, well let's just—and if we don't finish I'll come back another time. One last question...

THOMSON: If you can ever get an appointment.

STERN: ...I think it's a somewhat difficult question to answer and you may not even want to tackle it, but, and I don't want to load the question. To what degree, if at all, did you perceive a change in the mood or atmosphere or temper of your job or the State Department with the change in presidents? Was there an immediate kind of

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change? Was it very subtle? Was it slow or did you not really—did the things pretty much continue more or less unchanged for a substantial period of time? I was just going to make one very brief illustration. I was thinking along these lines. A friend of mine told me of an incident in which he was teaching a course in a California prison at the end of the Brown [Edmund G. (Pat) Brown] Administration. He noted—he thought it was extraordinary that when he went to teach the first class, which came after Regan [Ronald Regan] had defeated Brown in the election which was what, '66? I think it's '66. That the guards who had always been sort of passively cooperative suddenly became very hostile. It was almost as if they sort of had legitimization for this kind of behavior because they knew a new administration was coming in. That sort of struck me as being an interesting example. I wonder if in any way you perceived changes immediately or if you did at all?

THOMSON: Well, we went through a few days and maybe more of great fear in my division of State. A fear articulated to either all of us or a few of us by Roger Hilsman, that if Kennedy's assassin had in fact been let into the country by a State Department officer in Moscow, there might well be a major resurgence of McCarthyism toward our branch of the government. Our division of the executive branch.

And that we ought to be very careful about impending witch hunts. I was asked at some point and, I can't

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remember when, by Bill Sullivan, who was for some reason willing to trust me though I later on learned to distrust him—to do a very private study on some aspect of—to assemble documents and to do a study on how we got to where we were in Vietnam in the year 1963, lest a congressional committee got to work on this stuff and that we have ready some pretty impressive materials of self defense. It was just suddenly seized from upstairs—from Harriman's office by Sullivan. Saying, "Would you please do this very privately?" I remember very little about it. That again, that was perhaps in January of '64—that again indicated an ongoing unease about what kind of assault we would be under. There was also unease among those of us who had been for Stevenson, accepted Kennedy, been rather bewitched for—let's say enchanted by aspects of Kennedy, but had been appalled by the nomination of Johnson as vice president at the convention. And appalled by the behavior of Johnson whenever he moved toward our region. He was notorious on his famous trips as being impossibly demanding and obtuse and quite rigidly conservative on all matters relating to Asia. So we had no grounds for trusting the new President, and some grounds for fearing him. He was not our kind of guy. And we were apprehensive. His Thanksgiving speech to the nation, I thought, had a great curative effect right after the assassination. I remember my wife weeping at great length and feeling somehow very comforted by him. He came across as a reassuring, avuncular person. That was a temporary

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help. That's about all I can say on that question, I think.

STERN: Can you recall then that it did impact your work, in the sense that you now felt that there was a new element at least an element of uncertainty, let's put it that way.

THOMSON: Oh yes. Very much an element of uncertainty. I think one felt that progress on the stuff we'd be doing might be considerably set back, particularly the China stuff. Vietnam was in a nice big swirl, bordering on chaos, much of the time from Diem's assassination onward. Johnson seemed not on the verge of doing anything dangerous or anything at all. He kept trying to figure out how to be president and shortly thereafter how to get reelected.

STERN: Ok, then on that note, which is a good transition, let me turn to Vietnam. There is a good deal of material in your papers on Vietnam, although I think it's fair to say it was not a top preoccupation, especially while you were with Bowles.

THOMSON: I was dragged into Vietnam kicking and screaming, whenever I was dragged into it, and I had disesteem for that region. I had never been there. I thought it was unimportant. I thought it had been messed up by the colonial powers. I thought we had no business walking into that swamp. Any self-respecting great power should avoid it. Terrible climate. Bad history. And in every sense something to be avoided, not only by the U.S. government, but by me personally. I also had what I might call Sinocentric

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contempt for these semi-colonial barbarians of the south.

[Laughter]

STERN: Never the less despite your disinclination, it's...

THOMSON: I got dragged in.

STERN: ...it's obvious—you did get dragged in. There are a substantial number of things in your papers and the thing that struck me, and again it's so typical of so many of the other issues we discussed earlier, about China and other things, that you can see the unfolding of the policy within the internal and a sense—the struggles within the administration. There were clearly at least two sides if not more. As I did before I can sum it up...

THOMSON: There were seven sides.

STERN: ...I'm sure there were more than two, right, but the two that were clearest, which I think it so happens to be the same as last time, is on the one hand Bowles, and on the other, Walt Rostow. You can see in some of the documents, the Taylor [General Maxwell D. Taylor]-Rostow Report, which is in November 1961, which recommended sending American advisors, helicopters, arms etc., and if necessary "massive numbers of American troops." So there are the seeds. It's right there and it's still 1961. On the other hand, just a few months later in early '62, there is a long Chester Bowles memo which you may have written. It was not clear to me from the accompanying material, but I suspect that you did or at least you had a hand in it. It essentially said: 1.) the United States must recognize that the Diem regime

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represents the legacy of inept colonialism, 2.) That American policy must emphasize regional economic development, not military intervention, 3.) That we should use Laos as an example and not be trapped by the political and military errors of the past, but we must define our long term goals and do so now, and above all, warn against being caught in a box where our only choices are either retreat or escalation. An escalation which could bring on World War

III. And also, by the way, asks—suggests—that we open a dialogue with North Vietnam through the Yugoslavs. These struck me as being in a sense the two basic possibilities within the administration. Obviously there were a lot of subtle in betweens. But, that's it basically and the one great question can never be resolved, which as you suggested before is to where Kennedy would have gone and we both know all the opinions on that from various sources. But, that's essentially it, it strikes me. You have Rostow saying we need "realistic military options" and Bowles calling for this regionalism and de-emphasis of the military option and all the rest of that. Now, what I would really like to know is how early did this kind of conflict become apparent and how important did you think it was—in other words, I'm suggesting that I think we tend to view Vietnam from what happened later and perhaps project into the early period a bit more importance than there was. How early did you see this as possibly a very serious crisis? Or did you tend to sort of dismiss it as being not that important?

THOMSON: Well, I personally regularly thought that Bowles overstated

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the case.

STERN: Some of those memos by the way were endless in length. Those must have been the kind that turned Kennedy off.

THOMSON: I thought first of all that he went on at too great of length and second of all that he overstated the case. Now, it turns out—the memos were too long and, by the way, I did not write them. If I had written them they would have been much shorter. One thing I can say for Chester Bowles was that he took a lot of staff aid at all stages of writing until the final phase. And the end product was always *entirely* his. I can say that because I would not have written that way. I often disapproved at least of the style of the end product, though seldom the content. So ghost writing for Bowles was not traditional ghost writing. You participated in a number of drafts, but then you found your immortal prose destroyed by him and put back in the same old, sometimes pabulum type phrasing which I tended to think would put off people like Kennedy, and Mac Bundy and certainly Dean Rusk. But...

STERN: This particular memo by the way was—I don't remember how many pages—but it was very long. I remember thinking that he was absolutely right, but Kennedy would never read anything that long. It was a little condescending, if that's the right word. I think it's the right word.

THOMSONS: Oh yes, I think it is. "My God, not another memo from Chet Bowles." So many people might have said that, from Kennedy on down. And the first thing they do is see how many pages

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it is. The second thing they do is not read it. None the less Bowles was right and Rostow was wrong. Another reason why I thought he was more right than I was—Bowles, despite his style. In content he was more accurate, more prescient than I was and some of the rest of us. The reason why I didn't go along much of the time was that I personally could not believe that this country, under any electable president, would do what we eventually did.

STERN:           That's precisely the point I'm after.

THOMSON:       It took me a long time to believe it. Once I believed it—and believed it was more or less unreversible—I had no option but to leave, to quietly get out. It was too appalling a thing to live with. While there was still a chance to turn things around or while one's wishful thinking made one believe that you could turn things around, it was worth staying around. But Bowles was right. Now, my inattention to Indochina has the origins or the sources, the reasons that I have already cited. My attention to Vietnam was forced upon me every time I had to try to tell Bowles not to send the memo or at least to phrase it differently and when I got to Hilsman, my attention was an occasional responsibility thrust upon me in terms of special projects dealing with a congressman or two, congressional mail, letters from Reinhold Niebuhr [Rev. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr], I should say postcards, and Norman Thomas [Norman M. Thomas] and sundry good guys who were raising warning

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signals. Then, finally in the autumn of '63, participating, as a voyeur in those endless meetings about what to do about Diem. Voyeur meaning Hilsman would be briefed after the highest level meetings and vent his spleen and his frustrations and his joys and his anxieties on his closest staff, and fill us in. This is why I finally vented my spleen one day in writing a spoof on a White House meeting, although I had attended none of them. The spoof, which is called "Minutes of the White House Meeting"...

STERN:           Which he cites in his book.

THOMSON:       ...is in the Arthur Schlesinger book in full.

STERN:           It's in Hilsman's book too.

THOMSON:       Schlesinger has the whole document. Curiously intruding into the text with a little footnote saying, this was written by a free spirit within State at one point in the autumn of 1963. I gave him permission to use it, anonymously. That's my Vietnam stance, posture, background, etc.

STERN:           That memo itself suggested to me when I read it, that you did not take Vietnam that seriously. You can cut me short here if you feel I'm wrong, that is that you may have obviously seen the potential for disaster, but the



very fact that you wrote the memo the way you did suggested to me that you really didn't think they could ever do anything so crazy.

THOMSON: I think it works both ways. Deep down I did not think we could continue on the crazy path or could or certainly should. I did not believe it under Kennedy and as we went

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into '64 and particularly the election of '64, I did not believe it would happen under Johnson. I wrote that memo in part, out of this belief but in part also as a covert way to attack the bad guys because ridicule is one form of assault and I gather that General Krulak [Victor Krulak] is still trying to find out who wrote that memo.

STERN: It's identified in Hilsman's book.

THOMSON: Is it, from me?

STERN: He uses your name.

THOMSON: Well, when he wrote it in the Schlesinger book—I am told by Ernest May that Krulak went through the roof and was going to kill whoever did that.

[Laughter]

STERN: Perhaps he's never read Hilsman's book.

THOMSON: I'm sure not.

STERN: In February of '62, Bowles wrote to the U.S. ambassador in Thailand, Kenneth Young [Kenneth T. Young], saying he was sending you in March of '62 to be his eyes and ears for a discussion of development of the Mekong River, the whole problem of the economic cooperation idea from that memo. Did you take that trip? Do you have any recollections of the substance of this memo? In other words, Bowles seems to be trying to actively put some teeth into this whole notion of regional economic cooperation. That was something even Johnson talked about doing during the whole escalation of the war.

THOMSON: I'm sure. One of Bowles' pet projects was the Mekong.

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Who got him onto the Mekong originally, I don't know. Could have been Lilianthal [David Lilianthal] or someone way back. But he felt—let us say

water for peace—Rostow was food for peace—in other words we'll feed the Chinese if they stop supporting aggression. A curious concept. If they call off their dogs and lie low. Bowles felt—someone had told him—I know, Tex someone at the United Nations. That's an interesting name because he was—his nickname was Tex. He had been involved in Southeast Asian development and he was apparently quite a salesman on Mekongism. He got Barbara Ward [Lady Jackson] all excited about the Mekong. Barbara Ward got Lyndon Johnson all excited about the Mekong. Prior to the Johns Hopkins speech, the Mekong suddenly—while we had delegates in the meeting in Wellington saying “no,no,no,no” on the Mekong. Suddenly the President gives this great speech saying we are going to do the Mekong. That's because Barbara Ward was in the Johnson garden that Saturday before the speech and said, “Hey how about the Mekong.” And he said, “Where?” And off they went. Bowles again, I think, overdid the Mekong. People began to say, “Oh my God not another Bowles Mekong memo.” But it made sense in many ways. Why not stop fighting and start developing. It's almost Rostowvian in its sense that rationality will prevail in such a dynamic situation as the Vietnam Revolution—Vietnamese revolution. I did go in '62 to a conference of ambassadors in the Far East, chaired by Bowles, I believe Baguio, in the Philippines. And I did

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not believe at the time that they would do anything much about the Mekong.

STERN: Did you go to Thailand? He said he was sending you. It sounded pretty much as though, as if...

THOMSON: He did not send me to Thailand.

STERN: You did not go. The memo makes it sound as though it was pretty much a decision to be taken.

THOMSON: Well, I went to Thailand a couple of times, but I do not think that on that occasion—no, I'll have to check some log. That may have been the year in which Bowles came around through the Middle East and I met him in Bangkok. Then we went on to the Baguio Conference. We went to Phnom Penh and had an extraordinary time with Sihanouk [Prince Norodom Sihanouk] and then went on to the Philippines to this conference of ambassadors.

STERN: Can you elaborate on the extraordinary time with Sihanouk?

THOMSON: Oh, because Cambodia was such an island of peace and calm and charm and development, and it was the classic example of a neutralized southeast Asian country in which eighteen different nations of all persuasions were participating—from Czechs to Chinese to Americans and Russians and Japanese—in the development of this small island of peace, surrounded by bristling hostile forces. And Ankor

Wat was just an amazing thing to see...it's blinking.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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