

Chester L. Cooper Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 5/6/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Chester L. Cooper
Interviewer: Joseph E. O'Connor
Date of Interview: May 6, 1966
Location: Arlington, Virginia
Length: 22 pages

Biographical Note

Cooper, a liaison officer to National Security Council staff from the Central Intelligence Agency and staff assistant to Ambassador Harriman at the Geneva conference on Laos (1961-1962), discusses the effects of downsizing the National Security Council, the 1961-1962 Geneva Conference on Laos, and John F. Kennedy's and Nikita S. Khrushchev's 1961 Vienna meeting, among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed May 3, 1977, copyright of these materials has passed to the United States Government upon the death of the interviewee. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Chester L. Cooper, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, May 6, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

of Chester L. Cooper

to the

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

I, Chester L. Cooper of Washington, D.C., do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interview conducted at Arlington, Virginia on May 6, 1966, May 16, 1966, and June 9, 1966 for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The interview is to be opened immediately to general research.
2. Researchers who have access to the transcript of the interview may listen to the tape; however, this is to be for background use only. Researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote from the tape.
3. I retain literary property rights to the interview for ten years or until my death, whichever is the later, at which time the rights shall be assigned to the U. S. Government.
4. Researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations without my express consent in each case.
5. Copies may be provided to researchers and to other institutions, on request, for deposit in their collections.
6. This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Chester L. Cooper
Chester L. Cooper

April 18 1977
Month, Day, Year

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

May 3, 1977
Month, Day, Year

Chester L. Cooper—JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Cooper's role on McGeorge Bundy's staff
2	Difficulty with gathering intelligence information for international policy
3	Communication between the White House and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) prior to 1960
4	Effects of downsizing the National Security Council
5	Possible Bay of Pigs prevention
7	Struggles with forming international policy: Indochina and Cyprus
9	1961-1962 Geneva Conference on Laos and William Averell Harriman
14, 17	Harriman's successful Laos settlement negotiations
16	Possible use of military forces in Laos
19	John F. Kennedy's and Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev's 1961 Vienna meeting
21	Russia's relationship with Laos and China

First of Three Oral History Interviews

with

Chester L. Cooper

May 6, 1966
Arlington, Virginia

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Cooper, you said there were several things you might like to comment on. I wonder if you'd begin by commenting on whatever you'd care to.

COOPER: Well, let me first indicate the matters which I dealt with on the White House staff and what I was doing during the period between my initial involvement and the assassination. After the Bay of Pigs incident it was quite clear that there was a considerable gap between policy interests and the ability of the intelligence community, and particularly the C.I.A. [Central Intelligence Agency] to relate its analytical, evaluation and estimating capabilities to what the policymaker needed and wanted. The Agency had then, and still has, a tremendous capability for analysis, evaluation, and research in a host of areas. The reason for my being assigned to the Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] staff was to provide a bridge between the issues that were bothering the President [John F. Kennedy], Bundy, and other high officials at the policymaking level, and the information that could be provided to help them make decisions or analyze the consequences of certain decisions that had been made. And so about half my time was spent at the White House and the rest at the Agency relating the Agency's activities, primarily its analytical activities, to the requirements of the policymakers at the White House level.

In this connection, I obviously became involved in a large number of international problems. In fact, whatever area was troublesome at the time: the Yemen, Cuba, the Congo, Cyprus, and in later stages obviously Indochina.

The problem of getting enough factual information about some of these rather remote areas with which we have had some difficulties is a serious problem for any Administration. When something happens in the Congo there aren't very many people who know very much about the Congo; the personalities in its government; the nature of its tribal patterns; the nature of its topography; the ease or difficulty of communicating from one part of the country to the next; the issues and groups involved, the particular individuals who are playing key roles and so on. And essential to any sophisticated decision about such questions as, "Should we get involved in the Congo or shouldn't we?" or, "Is Lumumba [Patrice Lumumba] a good fellow or isn't he?" or, "If he isn't, what's wrong with him?" or whether the country can indeed be governed from the capital or whether both the history and the topography and the mores of the country are such that this is unrealistic. These are all terribly important as bits of background or particulars against which important decisions have to be made. So in situations like the Congo, or the Yemen, countries not very well known to very many people, or the areas along the Himalayas where the Chinese and the Indians were fighting, there's a host of information which is available or at least can be made available by someone who has been studying the area for many years that might not necessarily come to light unless he is aware that there is a need for it, is told who, in particular, needs it, and knows of the timing of the decisions so that the material is transmitted in time to be of use. There's nothing worse than having important or relevant information turn out to be of historical interest with a policymaker saying, "It would have been wonderful if we had known that," two days afterwards. So, in many of these areas, there was a great effort, and there still is, to relate intelligence research and analysis to policy problems. Obviously in the case of France or England or Germany or perhaps even the Soviet Union, there is a very high degree of expertise or at least sophistication throughout the government.

[-2-]

O'CONNOR: I have a question. This seems like a relatively obvious thing that a White House staff should be aware of the possibilities of getting information through the C.I.A. In other words it seems obvious to me that there should have been a connecting link between the White House staff and the CIA long before the 1960 or '61. Was there?

COOPER: Well, yes and no. You see, in the days of the N.S.C. [National Security Council] Planning Board and O.C.B. [Operations Coordinating Board], when the National Security Council was much more institutionalized, the relationships between the N.S.C. and the White House staff—and, incidentally, the White House staff was much smaller when the N.S.C. was more highly institutionalized than it was during the Kennedy Administration—there were fairly clearly established relationships. On the Planning Board, for example, the Deputy Director for Intelligence under whose aegis all of this activity goes on sat on the Planning Board together with the representative of the State Department who was head of the Policy Planning Council, and the other members of the

Planning Board. The C.I.A. representative was very much aware of what was going on because that was part of a....

O'CONNOR: Because there was an established procedure.

COOPER: There was an established procedure and although policy problems were not necessarily decided at this level, the C.I.A. official was cognizant of them. The Planning Board met twice, sometimes three times a week and each member had two assistants who met almost daily. Incidentally, the C.I.A. assistants at that time were Bill Bundy [William P. Bundy] and myself. So we did have a day-to-day feel for what was going on.

[-3-]

When the Kennedy Administration came in, the feeling was that the whole National Security Council process had become almost too highly formalized and overstated. Some said, and I think with justification, that it had become virtually ossified. So, there was a move fairly early on to eliminate both the Planning Board and the other arm of the N.S.C., the Operations Coordination Board, and to reduce the number of formal meetings of the National Security Council. As a result of this, the fairly well established links between, say, the Agency or even the Joint Chiefs [Joint Chiefs of Staff] or even parts of the State Department and the Security Council were broken. To some extent, they were replaced by or substituted for by the White House staff under Bundy, which was broader in competence and much larger in size than the staff under President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. The Bundy staff, fairly early on, tried, and to a very considerable extent succeeded, in compensating for the erstwhile Planning Board and O.C.B. functions. But the problem basically is that our government is too complex and the world is too complicated and fast moving to really substitute a small, albeit, dynamic and bright, staff for the more elaborate arrangements which had been developed under Truman [Harry S. Truman] and Eisenhower. So, the answer to your question is that the changes made by the Kennedy Administration in a sense temporarily broke the link between the policymaker and the intelligence analyst.

O'CONNOR: Well, when was the hiatus essentially? Did it begin really with the beginning of 1961 as soon as Kennedy and McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] took over?

[-4-]

COOPER: Virtually. As soon as the Planning Board and the O.C.B. were dropped and the more informal, and to some extent more effective, use of people rather than institutions took place. I think that it was the Bay of Pigs that awoke many people in the Administration to the fact that some of these links in some way or another had better be reestablished without necessarily establishing a more elaborate machinery. There were many international problems emerging which required coordination

or a close relationship between the intelligence and policy agencies that had been broken as a result of eliminating the formal N.S.C. arrangements.

O'CONNOR: I was going to ask you if you thought this lack of communication—and apparently there was a certain lack of communication, this link was missing—would have played a significant role in preventing a Bay of Pigs or preventing the disaster that occurred?

COOPER: No, I don't. Well, maybe. I mean who knows? I think the problem there was that the operational side of the Agency, and that part of the Joint Chiefs involved in the Bay of Pigs, regarded this as such a sensitive operation that they didn't cut in any elements of the analytical side of the Agency. But I'm not sure that even if they had that anybody would have been so wise as to...

O'CONNOR: Yes, that's true.

[-5-]

COOPER: ...have been able to say, "Look you're doing the wrong thing," or "you're underestimating the Castro [Fidel Castro] capabilities," or "You're heading toward the wrong place." But the point is that the operational people had voluntarily isolated themselves from the analysts or at least the intelligence side of the Agency. I suspect they felt that the security of the operation was more important than any advice or guidance they could get from the chaps who might have been able to cast some light on the regime or additional light on some other problems. I'm not quite sure that this was the reason. Now it's also possible, of course, that if the Bay of Pigs had been subjected to discussions that might have taken place in a forum like the Planning Board, some words of caution or wisdom may have emerged which could have changed the course of events. On the other hand, I'm not sure frankly, that, in the light of the concern of the people working on the Bay of Pigs about security, this issue would necessarily have been brought to the Planning Board. One of the problems with the Planning Board was that it included several people representing agencies only peripherally involved in such things. For example, the Office of Emergency Management, the Bureau of the Budget and the A.I.D. [Agency for International Development]. That kind of a forum is perfectly okay to discuss broad international problems and policies. There may well have been some inhibitions about bringing the Planning Board into a discussion of such a sensitive specific matter.

O'CONNOR: Okay. I was wondering if the government suffered in any specific instances from the absence of this link that you're aware of. This almost sounds like a gap that was realized to be a gap before we suffered very seriously from it.

[-6-]

COOPER: I think so. Now, it may well be that some things could have been—the quality of some of the decisions might have been somewhat better by a perceptible

degree if this link were available. What I am sure of is that the quality and the relevance of, say, the national estimates or the economic analyses or the scientific analyses or whatever—could have been better if there had been a somewhat closer, a better feel for what it was that the policymakers were troubled about. After this link was established the relevance of the Agency's product, I think, did increase. Another aspect of this is that even if a study was relevant, it was quite likely not to reach the man who had particular responsibility simply because our government is so big and the "in" boxes are piled so high that routine distribution of these documents, for example, would be unlikely to hit the man who had a particular interest in that subject at the right time—not a vague interest that may have been evidenced the week before or might be generated a week later. He might not have seen the relevant paper unless somebody knew of his interest and that this was the chap who had the ball. So, there was a problem of gearing the whole output of a large research, analytical-evaluation operation to this rather finely tooled distribution—this is obviously still a problem.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we can go on from that, if you'd like to.

COOPER: Well, I'll give you a few specific examples of this. One sticks in my mind, and it had to do with the fighting in the Himalayas; the Chinese-Indian problem.

This was an area that very few people knew about. There are a large number of people who have some sophistication about India in the broad, and a large number of people who have a fairly good general knowledge about China, but not very many people who really could find on a map where these operations were taking place, let alone have a true feel for the difficulty of it; the problems that the Chinese might be having; the threat to the Indians, or whatever. For example, there was considerable

[-7 -]

discussion, I can remember on one occasion, on whether in that particular month the fighting would be reasonably easy or quite difficult for the Chinese. In other words to assess the urgency of the threat to the Indians at that time. The policy question had to do with aid for the Indians and how fast it would get to them. There was an amazing degree of ignorance about the depth of the snow and whether the wind was blowing in one direction or the other and whether this was good or bad for the Chinese or good or bad for the Indians. This was understandable; there aren't very many people who can be authoritative on a subject like this. I was able to turn the Agency's cartographers, meteorologists, and geographers loose on the problem. In the course of the day, they came up with a pretty useful assessment on the implications of current weather conditions on the whole question of the urgency of India's problems. This was just one small example.

Cyprus is another that comes quickly to mind. There was much confusion about how to address the possible partition of Cyprus. (This was during the Greek-Turkish squabble). Not very many people know about Cyprus in any case, let alone where the Turks and Greeks are. And the business of carving up any country is a dangerous and difficult thing in any case. But we were able to get from the Agency a very good assessment of the relationship between the Turkish and Greek areas, and the implications of various partition plans, not

only in terms of political questions, but where the water was; whether the distribution of crops would permit a simple partition; whether the fishermen would have to be turned into farmers and the farmers turned into fishermen. These are the questions that require a certain amount of sophistication. They're the kinds of problems that are hard to foresee, and frequently have to be dealt with urgently. You just can't call the world's outstanding authority in a university in California and ask him to do a three-month study. What is necessary in these kinds of situations is to get the best information possible in the course of a few days.

[-8 -]

These are the kinds of problems that were dealt with, to say nothing, of course, of the broader or more important problems of the national estimating process, the national intelligence assessments. It is frequently useful to ask the intelligence community to estimate the probable consequences of taking a certain course as opposed to another. Or to examine such matters as the capabilities of the E.O.K.A. [Ethniki Organosis Kyrion Agoniston] in Cyprus or the Chinese in the Himalayas. Estimates of this type can provide an important input into important policy questions. But unless intelligence officials have a feel for emerging policy issues, they have to wait for somebody to say, "Well, why don't we have an intelligence report for this?" Even assuming that a hard-pressed policymaker would think of it, the deadlines are frequently too short, and the intelligence analysts don't really get the full flavor of the problems.

Well, that was the circumstances and basically the function that I was asked to perform as a bridge between the White House staff and C.I.A. In the course of this, of course, I became involved in a host of other things just by being present. I was asked to go with the American delegation to Geneva to work on the Laos settlement. In part, this was because I had been in Geneva to work out an Indochina settlement in 1954, but in part, too, I was asked because I had developed a feel for the relationships between the policy problems and what the intelligence people could contribute. As you know, William Averell Harriman spent more than a year trying to negotiate a Laos settlement.

O'CONNOR: Well, what were your relationships to Harriman? The only two names that one Reads, for example, in Arthur Schlesinger's [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] book is Harriman and Sullivan [William H. Sullivan].

[-9 -]

COOPER: Yes, that's right. Well, Harriman was in charge of the delegation and Sullivan, by an interesting quirk in fate became number two, and then when Harriman wasn't there Sullivan took over.

COOPER: After a couple of weeks Harriman cut the American delegation way back until the original group of one hundred was down to about twenty. My role there was primarily the intelligence advisor and general substantive aide to

Harriman, since there were few people there who had much experience with the 1954 Indochina problem and that was a role that I could fill. The hierarchy originally consisted of Harriman, John Steeves [John M. Steeves], and Joe Sisco [Joseph John Sisco], with Steeves being the deputy to Harriman and Sisco, in a sense, coordinating the efforts of the delegation. Sisco had to go back to Washington, he thought temporarily, for some United Nations activities, and Sullivan was sent out to replace him, at least for a while. It turned out that Sisco was less mobile than Sullivan and so it was agreed that Sullivan would stay and Sisco would remain in Washington. In the meantime, Steeves and Harriman had some differences on how to resolve some of the problems at issue. When Harriman decided to cut the delegation he decided that he didn't need a deputy on the level of Steeves. And so Steeves left and Sullivan became number two—a very effective number two.

O'CONNOR: Yes. Well, when you mentioned differences in points of view, I don't know whether you'd know much about this specific point, but Harriman himself has been publicly and privately rather critical of other people in the State Department who had a very definite different point of view with regard to Laos and particularly with regard to Souvanna Phouma. And I wondered if you knew.... I was trying to find out the names of the people so that I might talk to them, who did disagree on this particular incident. And I wonder if Steeves was the logical candidate?

[-10-]

COOPER: Steeves was one of them, but there were personality differences too. Steeves was one and.... Many of the people in our Laos embassy, whether they were foreign service officers, intelligence operatives or military officers, took a dim view of Souvanna. Pretty much the whole embassy in Vientiane was in the Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] camp.

O'CONNOR: The only exception to that was Ambassador Winthrop Brown [Winthrop G. Brown], I guess. And I suppose he didn't get there until later.

COOPER: Well, Brown was more flexible on this, yes. And Brown had the word from Washington. But the men who had lived through the earlier Souvanna and Phoumi business all had serious doubts about Souvanna and had pretty much put their money on Phoumi. Harriman, on the other hand, took a very dim view of Phoumi and was ready to risk a fair amount on Souvanna. And I think it turned out that he was right. In any case, the whole Laos conference hung on the readiness of both sides to accept a quote, neutralist, end quote. It was not only a question of whether Souvanna was better than Phoumi, it was a question of whether we would be ready to take a chance on Souvanna in the hope that the Laos settlement could be worked out, or whether we would walk out on the Conference.

O'CONNOR: Well, to a great extent, I would think this would depend on what the C.I.A. men felt towards Souvanna Phouma in Laos. And you were a C.I.A. link with

whatever C.I.A. intelligence had to offer and I wondered, what were you telling Ambassador Harriman, for example, what role did you play in this specific instance?

[-11-]

COOPER: Well, I was taking a pretty dim view of Phoumi myself. But, to be fair about it, I was not in Vientiane. I concede that tremendous issues about the future of Laos hung on our readiness to accept Souvanna and I was much closer to the Administration's desire to resolve the Laos problem, and that unless a clear-cut case could be made against Souvanna, his inner strength and pro-Communist leanings, then Souvanna would perhaps be the guy. I must confess that I was never convinced that Souvanna had pro-Communist leanings, although there I had my doubts about some of the people around Souvanna, especially his number two, a chap named Quinim [Quinim Pholsena], who has since been assassinated. To the extent that people had doubts about Souvanna, they based them on the people who were in his coterie. But, as part of the gamble on Souvanna, there was the gamble that Souvanna would be able to control or contain these rather dubious characters.

O'CONNOR: Well, can you lay greater stress, for example, on the military or the C.I.A. or the State Department in trying to determine who was responsible for our earlier backing of Phoumi?

COOPER: I dare say it was probably a combination of the Agency and the military there with the acquiescence of the State Department.

O'CONNOR: What I'm looking for is somebody else to talk to. Now everyone you talk to is inclined to agree that was...

COOPER: Talk to Jorgensen [Gordon Jorgensen] who is now in Saigon.

O'CONNOR: I'll catch him when he comes back.

[-12-]

COOPER: Jorgensen was the C.I.A. man out in Vientiane at that time. He was the guy who, in a sense, set up Phoumi. The thing that you have to recognize is that Laotian politics at that time was, and probably still is, something of a morass with all kinds of competing factions, with three regional groupings based on original kingdoms, and so forth. And there was the problem of finding somebody who could at least attract the passive if not active support of enough of these elements to make a going thing of a government in the face of a very strong Pathet Lao threat. Phoumi seemed to have those qualities, and probably did to the extent that any Laotian did. Souvanna—and one must not be too wise in hindsight—was an amiable and articulate and bright gentleman, but Souvanna was not known at that time as a fellow who would be ready to take off his coat, get to work, forget about his house in the south of France, and really get down to business. And indeed,

after the Laos issue was resolved at Geneva, even the most optimistic of the people who participated in the conference had a feeling that it pretty much depended on whether Souvanna was going to buckle down or whether, after a few weeks of frustration, he would just chuck it and go back to France. In the event though—much to our surprise, and I suspect even to Souvanna’s—he found his responsibilities sufficiently challenging and developed a sufficient stake in seeing the settlement work, so that he did stick it out. And by now he’s lasted a lot longer than most of the chiefs of state present at that conference. But it wasn’t all that clear cut in 1961 and the personalities of Souvanna and Phoumi were not all that clear cut either. So, basically, it was a question of finding somebody that could head a neutralist government and who would be at least reasonably acceptable to both sides.

[-13-]

O’CONNOR: The question I don’t quite understand, among the many questions I don’t quite understand, concerning the particular conferences, for example, the conference at Geneva, is what the United States really had to bargain with. What strength was on our side?

COOPER: Well, on Laos we had frankly very little leverage. Basically what we had was the presence of American military forces (Marines) in Thailand. And it was that bit of leverage which, I think if you look back to try to explain why the Communists were ready to come to the conference (because they were in pretty good shape on the ground there) it was their concern about the American military presence in Thailand and their expectation, which was probably not unjustified, that if they pushed too far on the military front, the Americans might occupy some strategic spots in Laos at the request of Phoumi—which incidentally was another reason why Phoumi was regarded as a consequential figure by some. But basically that was about all the leverage that we had then.

O’CONNOR: In the United States I think we tend to lump the problems of Indochina—that is, the problems of Laos and South Vietnam, North Vietnam—all in the same basket and to think of them similarly, and your explanation is very logical, it sounds very logical, but the threat of American military presence in a small Indochinese country doesn’t seem to have deterred anyone in South Vietnam, and I’m surprised that it would deter someone in Laos.

[-14-]

COOPER: Well, after all, you’re talking about a situation that’s several years later. At that time there wasn’t a significant American presence in Indochina. The Pathet Lao and even the Vietminh who were present in Laos were in organized units and the hostilities in Laos were very different from the hostilities in Vietnam. The prospect of having right in Laos, guarding the capitol or pushing out from it, a regiment of well-armed American Marines was something that was not very appetizing to the Communists.

O'CONNOR: In other words, it sounds as though that particular threat was actually more effective in Laos than it has subsequently proved to be in Vietnam because of the different sort of hostility in Laos.

COOPER: Yes. And also because the Pathet Lao together with the Vietminh had much lower sights in Laos. They wanted to, in a sense, occupy some of the country, but not necessarily take it all over. And the part they wanted to occupy, obviously, was the part especially bordering on Vietnam—to protect that corridor.

O'CONNOR: Well, if this was the only advantage we had in the negotiations this does seem to support those who said that Ambassador Harriman did a magnificent job in handling it.

COOPER: He did, there's no question about it. Now, of course, there are other things that developed there which I think were favorable to us. It was during this period when Sino-Soviet problems became very much out in the open. I don't think that the Russians felt that Laos was important enough to them to back either the Chinese or the Pathet Lao in a completely unyielding, all or nothing stand. And especially since the solution that emerged was one that involved a neutralist government with a certain amount of international support. And the American position was one that had a considerable amount of support of neutralist countries.

[-15-]

O'CONNOR: Do you think we would have used the military forces, which we put into Thailand? Do you know whether or not John Kennedy had actually...

COOPER: I think that there was a very high probability that those forces would have been sent to Laos. I think the only questions were how many and what areas they would occupy, whether they would screen the capital, permitting Phoumi's forces to engage outside, or whether they would go beyond Vientiane's outer perimeter and engage the enemy outside. These questions were discussed seriously with the Joint Chiefs, as I remember it, arguing for a more aggressive role for American forces.

O'CONNOR: The Joint Chiefs were?

COOPER: Yes, in Laos. Once you put them in they wanted to use the forces in something more than a state defense role.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I was wondering. I thought perhaps I was confusing these two issues. I'd heard the Joint Chiefs were opposed to the idea of—maybe this tells me where I made a mistake—a limited use of troops in Vietnam.

COOPER: No, we're talking about Laos.

O'CONNOR: I mean, Laos, I'm sorry. Yes.

COOPER: Their point was that once you've committed American forces there it was unrealistic to expect them to stand sentry duty around the perimeter of Vientiane. They ought to be used in a somewhat more aggressive way. This doesn't necessarily mean that they wanted to chase up to the Chinese border or move against the North Vietnamese border either. That wasn't it.

[-16-]

O'CONNOR: A charge has been leveled at—various charges have been leveled at the Joint Chiefs of Staff in connection with the question in Laos. One charge is that they considered—more than considered, preferred perhaps—the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Did you ever hear that discussed or suggested?

COOPER: Well, that kind of thing is always suggested, sometimes more forcefully than others and sometimes at a higher level than others. There's always somebody who says, "You know, we've got these things and this looks like a very good place to try them." But I really don't think that, in this particular case, advanced very seriously, although I do think it was raised and dismissed.

O'CONNOR: Okay. I would like to ask you one more thing really about Laos and then you can add anything on that particular question you might like to discuss. Then we can move on. But what I had in mind is something that's a little unclear in my mind. I know that Ambassador Harriman did a fine job, but I only know that because of the results. I don't know the mechanics—in other words the mechanics of the negotiation at Geneva—I don't know whether these can be described really, but I thought perhaps you might be able to tell us something about what it is when you say, what do you mean when you say, "Ambassador Harriman did a brilliant job"? How'd he go about doing this? I don't mean to have you describe the room or the fact that he went in and sat down, but....

[-17-]

COOPER: No, no naturally. Well, I think there are two or three qualities about Harriman that made the difference. One is that he regarded himself as the President's representative and not an underling in the Department of State. That meant that he packed a great deal of weight. In the discussions he spoke not as a relatively junior member of the State Department, but as, the voice of the President.

Secondly, he did not regard himself as being bound by literal instructions. The President had instructed him to get a solution and to make sure that it was a non-Communist one. And, basically, those were the two guidelines that he used. He interpreted any other instructions he received, unless they amplified these two or came specifically from the President, in his own way. Thirdly, he was very flexible—flexible in terms of his understanding of his instructions, but also flexible in terms of undertaking anything that seemed to him to make sense. For example, he spent some time talking to the North

Vietnamese, which perhaps a lesser man would not have done. In addition, well before Souvanna was regarded as a person with whom he could deal, he spent a fair amount of time with Souvanna.

O'CONNOR: Yes. He had met him in New Delhi, I believe.

COOPER: He had met him in New Delhi but spent time with him in Geneva, and as consequence got to know Souvanna better. Souvanna, for his part, developed faith and confidence in Harriman. There was a reasonably good rapport built up between them well before the issue arose of Souvanna's taking over the government. Harriman also indicated his readiness to talk to the Chinese. But on that one, Washington said, "No." He's still smarting from that. It was these qualities, which I think, made Harriman an effective negotiator. He didn't have to call Washington or wait for a telegram from Washington before the next day's move. He pretty much kept the reins.

[-18-]

O'CONNOR: Another puzzle that occurs to me right now is with the question of Souvanna or Phoumi so confused, so up in the air, do you know whether or not it was essentially on the basis of Harriman's recommendation that John Kennedy, Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk], or whoever was involved said, "All right, we'll accept this settlement"?

COOPER: Yes, yes.

O'CONNOR: It sounds almost as though Harriman was the only major figure who decided very strongly that Souvanna is the best we can get.

COOPER: I think this is true. But I think you should also realize that once Harriman got into the swing there and began to take charge, Washington didn't give the Laos Conference or even Laos too much attention. It was pretty much, "Well, let Averell do it." They had obviously some people backing him up in Washington, but the focus of the decision-making was pretty much removed from Washington to Geneva, except for certain really major questions such as—well, obviously Harriman recommended the Souvanna solution and recommended that we ditch Phoumi and so forth, and this was agreed to in Washington. He wouldn't have done it without a Washington okay. But on many other issues Harriman merely informed Washington of what he was doing, rather than asking them first. There's one other aspect of this worth noting and that is the problem of the Russians and the meeting in Vienna with the President and...

O'CONNOR: Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev].

[-19-]

COOPER: Yes. You've probably gotten various accounts of this and I wasn't at Vienna,

but I was with Harriman when he came back from Vienna. I had the feeling that Kennedy went to Vienna feeling that he could get more out of Khrushchev than in fact he got. I think Kennedy was somewhat startled and chastened by Khrushchev's hard line.

O'CONNOR: Was that Ambassador Harriman's view also?

COOPER: Yes, Berlin was the key issue obviously. But Kennedy tried to get from Khrushchev a strong commitment to resolve the Laos problem and to resolve it in a way that would respect the '54 agreements and so forth. Khrushchev apparently was by no means as forthcoming as we had hoped, but did say that he had an interest in settling the dilemma. In any case, Harriman worked awfully hard to parlay this very modest commitment of Khrushchev's into a somewhat stronger one and really milked it for everything he could get out of it.

O'CONNOR: It's a very hard question surrounding the relationship of Khrushchev to the Laos problem. His interest in Laos seems to have gone up and, down, up and down, at various times and I've heard someone say that the man who was in charge of the Far East, for in effect in the Soviet Foreign Office, Pushkin [Georgi M. Pushkin], was very much concerned and then died, and then Khrushchev's concern lagged after that.

[-20-]

COOPER: That's right. That's exactly right. In fact, Khrushchev wasn't all that much concerned about Laos in any case. But, whenever you have a conference like the one in Geneva where you have the Russians and the Chinese and the French and the Indians and the Americans and the British involved, this is something that obviously any chief of state is going to have to pay some attention to. Even though he wasn't necessarily interested in Laos, per se, he didn't want Laos to become a cause célèbre or a great source of irritation between the Americans and the Russians, or at least, to interfere with other things that were in train. And the real thing that was troubling Khrushchev was Berlin. He didn't want Laos to sour any arrangements that could be made on Berlin. But after the Conference was over, and I suspect during periods that the Conference was going on, Khrushchev just had no interest in Laos. I dare say Khrushchev couldn't find Laos on a map if he looked for it, and it was quite obvious after the Conference that Khrushchev was bored with the whole subject. It must have seemed to him to be awfully far away; they had very little leverage in the situation and he had many more things to worry about. The one thing that Harriman did succeed in doing was to get Pushkin—and presumably Pushkin checked with Moscow—to agree to accept the responsibility for Chinese actions in Laos.

O'CONNOR: I was under the impression that Pushkin volunteered for this, that this wasn't something that Harriman had suggested.

COOPER: Well, I'm not sure about that. It developed in a private talk between Pushkin

and Harriman. Harriman was quite pleased about it.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I can imagine.

[-21-]

COOPER: But, I suspect that what happened was that Harriman said, "Well, this is good and well. You're forthcoming and we've had these dealings with you and we understand one another and so forth. We've had enough experience so that to a very considerable extent we can trust each other on some of these issues, but I don't trust the Chinese on this." And Pushkin, as I gather, said, "Well, we will take the responsibility for Chinese actions," which was a pretty tough thing for Pushkin to say especially in the light of the current state of Chinese-Russian relations—it was quite evident very early in that Conference that they were bad. But anyway, Pushkin did make this commitment.

O'CONNOR: Okay, that runs me out as far as Laos is concerned.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

[-22-]

Chester L. Cooper Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name Index

B

Brown, Winthrop G., 11
Bundy, McGeorge, 1, 4
Bundy, William P., 3

C

Castro, Fidel, 6

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 4

H

Harriman, William Averell, 9, 10, 11, 15, 17, 18,
19, 20, 21, 22

J

Jorgensen, Gordon, 12, 13

K

Kennedy, John F., 1, 3, 4, 16, 18, 19, 20
Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeyevich, 19, 20

L

Lumumba, Patrice, 2

M

McNamara, Robert S., 4

P

Phoumi Nosavan, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19
Pushkin, Georgi M., 20, 21, 22

Q

Quinim Pholsena, 12

R

Rusk, Dean, 19

S

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., 9
Sisco, Joseph John, 10
Souvanna Phouma, 10, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19
Steeves, John M., 10, 11
Sullivan, William H., 9, 10

T

Truman, Harry S., 4