

John S. Everton Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 10/30/1969
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Biographical Note

John S. Everton, Ambassador to Burma (1961-1963), discusses the 1962 coup d'état, Burmese and Chinese foreign policy issues, and Burmese nationalization, among other issues.

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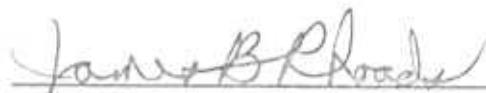
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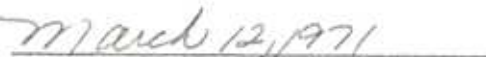
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John S. Everton – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN S. EVERTON

October 30, 1969
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, any questions? Is there anything...

EVERTON: No, I don't think so. And I assume that if we do talk about something that later ought to be deleted, we'll set it straight at the right time.

O'BRIEN: Sure. I guess the obvious place to begin is this question: When did you first meet President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

EVERTON: Well, actually, I didn't meet President Kennedy until very shortly before I went out to Burma because this appointment was in the context of the series of appointments that he made of people who knew the areas they were going to. Eddie Reischauer [Edwin O. Reischauer] in Japan, for example, was probably the best illustration of a man who knew the country intimately. And it was through a series of people in the State Department who knew something about my background and who suggested that I might be an appropriate person for appointment to Burma....I'd been out there, as I think you know, before for the Ford Foundation as their representative and knew U Nu, the then Prime Minister, and his cabinet intimately and had travelled widely throughout the country, so that I was rather well acquainted with Burma and with her problems.

O'BRIEN: Who were these people?

EVERTON: The people who knew me?

O'BRIEN: Yes, that made the suggestion that you be...

EVERTON: You know, you never quite know, but I'm sure that Chet Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] was one of them and possibly – well, Dean Rusk, of course, because he'd been president of the Rockefeller Foundation in the period that I was with Ford, so he certainly knew of my experience in Burma. But I think Bowles, probably, was one of the key people who suggested it. I know there were others who claimed they suggested my name, and whether they did or not, who knows?

O'BRIEN: Well, who informed you that you were going to be appointed or under consideration?

EVERTON: I was phoned by Chet Bowles because I had known him before, and he inquired whether I'd be willing to come down to Washington and see him. He didn't indicate what the nature of the interview would be. So I went down, and we had – oh, I spoke an hour or more on Southeast Asia and on Burma in particular. At the end of the period, he said, "Well, we've been considering you for the assignment in Burma, and would you consider going out?" And so this was the beginning, really, of the process. And of course it went through the usual period of security clearances and all that before it finally went out.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember anything about that and the briefing process that you went through?

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EVERTON: Well, I remember very well, of course, the appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee because I had rather anticipated – in that particular session – that there would be queries on China because of the sensitivity of the issue of China and Burma. In point of fact, this was not touched upon, at least if so, only in a slight way, and the discussion with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee centered primarily on inquiry as to the nature of my knowledge of Burma and what I knew, really, about the political situation there and about the general position of Burma at that time and, of course, my view of Burma in relation to the surrounding area. We did touch on the question of neutralism and nonalignment, the particular tradition which has been so characteristic of Burma in the past.

O'BRIEN: Did you get a feeling that the people on the Foreign Relations Committee had an understanding of the neutralism of a country like Burma at that point?

EVERTON: I certainly think, for example, that Mansfield [Mike Mansfield] understood and possibly some of the others, too.

O'BRIEN: Did you sense any opposition on the Committee or in the State Department or any of the outside groups to the appointment of a person like yourself?

EVERTON: No I didn't, really. There was no indication of such opposition, and it did seem to me that at that particular time, if you recall the period, people were more open to the idea of somebody who knew the area, for appointment, and clearly it was not a political appointment in the normal sense.

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O'BRIEN: Let's go into some of your background in Burma. You were there, of course, with the Ford Foundation.

EVERTON: I was there from '53 to '56 – well, about three and a half years, actually. I began the overseas development program for the Ford Foundation in Burma. There was no program there when I first went in, and so, of course, this involved extensive consultation and discussion with the Burmese government on what their national planning was, what their objectives were for the future, and also identifying those areas where there would be real potential for investment of technical assistance, and some assistance in the planning process for Burma. The areas we identified, primarily, were the obvious ones of agricultural development, public administration, education, this sort of thing.

O'BRIEN: The master plan, then, was the Nathan [Robert Roy Nathan] study, wasn't it?

EVERTON: Yeah, Bob Nathan's group went in at that time, and they were largely responsible for that rather large plan, which was posited for a period of five years or more ahead. Anythings which were done by the various agencies that were in there at the time, of course, the various agencies that were in there at the time, of course, were related to it. One interesting incident, which reveals something concerning the then political thinking of Burma, was the fact that within less than a month after my arrival, you may recall, Burma terminated her TCA [Technical Cooperation Administration] involvement. Prime Minister U Nu called me in to explain it to me and to assure me that this had no effect on the Ford Foundation involvement in Burma, but that they were terminating TCA because of the fact that the question of the Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalists, was up for discussion and debate in the U.N., and they felt in this particular period it was not appropriate to be receiving United States aid. He indicated further that in the case of the Ford Foundation aid his judgment was that there were no political strings attached, and there was no reason at all why they should not continue receiving aid from a

private source.

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As a result of this, we actually leased the property that TCA had been using in the Bank of India for the Ford Foundation offices.

Nine years later almost to the day, when I was there as Ambassador, General Ne Win called me to inform me that Ford Foundation and Asia Foundation were being terminated, but wished to assure me this had no effect at all on their desire for continuation of the AID [Agency for International Development] program. And the language was very similar to the language of U Nu nine years before. So I thanked him and had my administration officer go down and release the same property for a U.S. government agency. So it was a complete turnaround.

O'BRIEN: Are people like U Nu and, later, Ne Win really sensitive to domestic American politics? Do they have an understanding of the difference, let's say, between the thinking on the part of the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration towards Asia and the thinking in the 1960's?

EVERTON: I would say that the sensitivity is primarily towards personalities within the American system. It's quite clear that President Kennedy, world-wide, had a remarkable reputation; one has only to think of the reaction at the time of the assassination, ranging from Africa through Europe to Southeast Asia and anywhere you care to mention. This was a feeling that people had built up about the man, which was not necessarily politically oriented at all, but really believing that he was really concerned. I don't think they had the same feeling of warmth for some of those who had been in the Office of the Presidency prior to his time – or even since.

[-5-]

O'BRIEN: Well, in terms of Burma's foreign policy – not only with the United States, but in 1960 – what are the major pressing problems which take precedence?

EVERTON: Well, in 1961, when I went in as an Ambassador, the major problems for the Burmese was the fact of twelve hundred miles or more of common border with Mainland China and the fact that the Burmese must accommodate to this fact and that they could not do anything which would alienate the Chinese. And this resulted in them being very sensitive, for example, towards all Americans being in the border areas. In the period from '61 to '63, and onward, they placed a number of restrictions on the travel of Americans in that area, ostensibly because the security situation was not all it might be, but actually...[Interruption] Well, they used the excuse, in restricting the travel of foreigners, not simply Americans, that the security situation was not all that it might be.

You know, I'm sure, that the minority, ethnic groups – the Shans, the Kachins, the

Karens, the Mons, and the others – were engaged in insurgency virtually from the beginning of independence of Burma straight on through and indeed, up until today, this continues. The Union of Burma was not really a true union in the sense that there was complete unification. There were always the dissident minority, ethnic groups who were not always sympathetic with the central government.

Well, to go on with your question on the problems: I think clearly one of the principal problems for us in Burma related to the possible role of Burma in relation to the other countries of Southeast Asia. For example, Burma was the seat of the discussions which went on with respect to Laos in that particular period. Souvanna Phouma and Governor Harriman [William Averell Harriman] met in the embassy residence at Burma – in Ransoon – for discussion of Laos in the period when it was moving towards neutralization. And the Burmese, incidentally, took initiative to invite this meeting to Burma, feeling this was an appropriate place for them to meet, in a neutral, nonaligned country.

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One of our problems there, in the period I was there, related to the presence of U.S. military in Thailand, and if you recall, in 1962 we had probably a somewhat larger number in there than we had previously. The Burmese were rather concerned about this because they thought this might conceivably result in bringing about in the area generally a military situation which ultimately might affect them. I think it is fair to say that the primary concern of the Burmese seemed to be focused more heavily on their own welfare than on the implications of what was going to happen for the rest of the area as they've been very insulated, very isolated, rather parochial.

O'BRIEN: When you arrived in Burma, the problem of the Kuomintang troops was just finishing up, as I understand.

EVERTON: That's right. As a matter of fact, the whole involvement – or the suspected involvement – of the United States in the activity of the Kuomintang in Burma was a sore point with the Burmese. We did actually assist in the withdrawal of the Kuomintang troops, to the point where the numbers who were there in the border regions were considerably diminished. In the period that I was there as Ambassador, this was not, really, a lively issue, although it certainly was in the earlier period.

O'BRIEN: Well, U Nu was convinced, as I understand it, that the United States had been involved in at least providing the arms and...

EVERTON: This is correct, and also was persuaded that the Kuomintang had come with the definite intention of infiltrating Mainland China and felt that it would be a source of real embarrassment to the Burmese if they came in by way of Burma. Now, the fact of the matter was that one could not definitely document that all of the Kuomintang had come down from Taiwan because some of them actually had filtered down from Mainland China. As a matter of fact, some of them had been

in Burma for a long while because on that particular border they shift back and forth with the greatest of ease, and you cannot control effectively a border of twelve

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hundred miles in a jungle area and an area which is mountainous and where the terrain is very difficult.

O'BRIEN: Was there any direct involvement of agencies of the United States, let's say like the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], with those people? Was there anything more than an intelligence gathering operation?

EVERTON: This is the sort of thing which one doesn't really know, I suppose, the extent of the involvement. I think it's quite clear that we were interested in the Kuomintang, and in the role that they might possibly play in that particular period. Of course, they were also in Thailand – they weren't exclusively in Burma – and they shifted back and forth across the Thai border, too. But there the issue was quite different because the whole political attitude of Thailand was rather different from that of Burma and was not this sustained position of neutrality, of nonalignment, of, "Let us alone."

O'BRIEN: Well, was there any understanding in the border agreements that were worked out between China and Burma as to a solution to the presence of the Kuomintang in Northern Burma?

EVERTON: No, actually, the border agreements were principally intended to simply define more sharply the border and some disputed areas there. The Burmese felt that they had come to a very acceptable solution of the border problems with Mainland China when they had a sharper definition of the border areas. But the question of the Kuomintang was not really the formal question in that particular discussion; the primary concern was that there was not a clear demarcation, and it needed a new agreement in terms of where the border actually extended.

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O'BRIEN: Right. Well, you mentioned a couple of other things here, including United States military people in Thailand and also, of course, the extenuation of that, which involves Laos. How did this become involved in the context of your...

EVERTON: Well, for example, the Burmese objected strenuously, at one point, to overflights by American military aircraft over Burma. On one occasion, they made a formal protest at what they regarded as infringement of Burmese air territory by some of our jet fighters, who were based in

Thailand. The basis for their protest, however, was simply visual sightings and was not very sound documentation. It's quite conceivable that the border was infringed because with pilots who are not familiar with the terrain and flying at the speed at which they are flying in their jets, it would be very simple for them to drift over into Burmese areas. The real concern there was when they were ferrying aircraft across. Earlier on, the Burmese had been fairly relaxed about this, and they finally developed a position where they said, "Flights must go around; we don't want to be involved."

They were very careful to see to it that they were not involved, if it was humanly possible not to be involved, so that they would not be identified, again, by the Chinese, I suppose, in any manner, shape, or form with giving support to movements which were definitely designed to stem the communist threat in Southeast Asia. It was all tied back in to their neutralist position and to the sensitivity of their own position with respect to China.

O'BRIEN: Was there any other frictions or particular specific objections that the Burmese had to U.S. military presence there?

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EVERTON: No. Actually, as it was published in the Washington papers – I suppose the matter was not a classified matter, although it was played down a great deal by our own government and the Burmese – we had a long period of supplying military equipment to the Burmese themselves. General Ne Win, on one occasion, commented on this and said it was not a political decision to accept American equipment or to buy it, but it was rather, simply, that they preferred our equipment. Also, a substantial number of Burmese officers, in fact most of the younger officers, were trained in the same program within the States, and there were a number of mobile training teams who were going throughout Burma. Well, this sort of thing didn't seem to bother them, but rather, when there was the implication that American forces were being placed in Southeast Asia and it might have some repercussions on Burma. And this, of course, was clearly true as the buildup began in Vietnam. Their concern and preoccupation there was: "Well, they'll spill over into all Southeast Asia."

O'BRIEN: Well, during that first year you were there, Ne Win, as I understand it, made a rather extended trip to the Soviet Union and Communist China. And there were a number of these kind of visits that were going on, of high-level people...

EVERTON: Yes, there were visits between Communist China and Burma in both directions. These were usually concerned with cultural exchanges and had been occurring at intervals from the period when I was first there in 1953-1956. But there was a good deal of interchange. The initiative, usually, for the visits of the Chinese to Burma rested with the Chinese, who would always cite earlier generous invitations of U Nu to visit Burma, and the Burmese were put in a position where they couldn't very well say, "Well, we don't want you." But in some instances, I know, the Burmese were somewhat embarrassed by these visits.

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General Ne Win took a rather different view towards the Chinese than U Nu. And General Ne Win felt that U Nu had been rather soft on the Chinese. And Ne Win said when he first came in that he was going to adopt a vigorous policy of nonalignment which would affect all of the nations with which Burma had any relationship at all, including the Chinese. He didn't specify the Chinese, but this was the implication. And of course, what actually happened after the military coup d'etat in March of '62, when Ne Win came to power, with the nationalization of the businesses and the banks and the rest, really, the primary intent of this was to drive out the foreigners – both the Indians and the Chinese – who had control of the industrial sector and to Burmanize, place Burmese in their place. And in this instance, of course, the Chinese who were driven out were not Communist Chinese for the most part, I suppose, and many of the Chinese had been in Burma for a good long while. But, nevertheless, they were being shipped out – they were being shipped back to China – and it indicated a somewhat more independent position, I think, than had been characteristic of U Nu, at least, in the latter political debates in Burma.

O'BRIEN: Well, you've had an opportunity to know U Nu for a number of years, what kind of a person is he – or was he, let's put it this way?

EVERTON: Yes. U Nu – I knew him, of course, in the period when Burma was pretty much in the first flush of enthusiasm of planning and of development following independence and when you had the same sort of vitality in that movement which was observable in many other countries. This was in '53, when I first went out. The situation had changed very considerably by 1961 when I returned, and it seemed to me that some of the enthusiasm had run out and that even the planning which was being done was not as vigorous nor was it really as coherent because one of the things which had happened in the interval, too, was the fact that... Well, they'd had these engineering consultants and planning groups in there earlier on, and they'd developed long range plans. They didn't always follow these plans, and by '61, these groups were pretty much out of the picture and the Burmese were on their own. Of course, planning in Burma always centered in the Ministry of National

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Planning, and these groups were usually attached to that ministry, and to some extent, they were following the plans which had been projected by external consultants. But you didn't feel, really, that U Nu himself had quite the same vigor – at least I didn't – and quite the same drive that he'd had earlier on. I think he was running down a bit by the end of that period. U Nu of course – part of his strength of leadership for the Burmese was the fact that he was indeed a devout Buddhist, and he emphasized this very heavily. And, of course, as you many know, he attempted to make Burma a Buddhist state. Well, this was reversed when Ne Win came in, who didn't feel that this was the right thing to do. But U Nu was quite preoccupied in the latter stages of his regime with matters which were really essentially

religious rather than political in character, in some respects. And Ne Win, of course, was standing in the wings ready to take over if U Nu slipped, and this is exactly what happened. This dated from the earlier caretaker government period when Ne Win had been in for a short time under a gentleman's agreement, but not a coupe d'etat such as occurred later on in '62.

O'BRIEN: How was the Foreign Ministry to work with them?

EVERTON: Let me just say another word about U Nu. U Nu had charisma. I mean, he was this kind of a leader, and he appealed enormously to the common people of Burma, and had a very decided following. I think for the period immediately following independence he had a very different role because it took someone with his character, this personality, this warmth, to really attempt to draw them together. On the other hand, he was not a good administrator, and he was not able to cope with some of their problems: insurgency, divisions, the economic problems, some of the political problems. And he also did lose touch, to some extent, in the latter stages with his constituency, and he wasn't able to recoup that lost ground.

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O'BRIEN: One thing I was curious about when you mentioned the Buddhist question: How did the embassy react to this? How does the United States officially and unofficially react to this? Are we concerned in our liberal kind of way towards the Burmese government being religiously tolerant of particular Christian groups?

EVERTON: Well, actually, when you mention religious tolerance, it's true that historically, from the period of independence onward, the Burmese were very tolerant of minority religious groups, including the Christian groups. So you never had a situation there, as you had in some places, where they were under any kind of suppression. On the other hand, the 85 percent or more Buddhist constituency were very consistently practicing their Buddhism. And Buddhism in Burma, I think, to a greater extent than is true in some of the other Southeast Asian countries or some of the Asian countries, was really very much a way of life for the people; and the understanding of the culture, the understanding of the fabric of society, was impossible unless you understood the role of Buddhism there. It was more dominant; it affected their whole life to a greater extent than was true in some other areas. In the villages, of course, your pongyi, your monk was in just as dominant a role, really – even politically – in the villages as the headman of the village. And if you went to a village and you wanted to know what was really happening, you went to the pongyi, as well as to the head man.

There's one other area that occurs to me that we haven't touched on at all and which was one of the problems that we had to deal with during the period I was there, and this was the whole area of economic assistance of technical assistance. And in this area, I think it's fair to say that we were rather disappointed with the performances of the Burmese. It's true that we never invested heavily in Burma, but it's equally true that we did not see very significant results from the program that we did engage in there over a period of time. Of

course, you see, after the termination in '53 in TCA, then, when it was reestablished, it was never established as a mission in the ordinary sense of an AID mission in other countries. It was low-key, and the actual dimensions of the program, in terms of dollar dimensions, proportionately was much less than was true of many of the

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other countries in that area.

The program went on slowly over a very long period of time. One of the major projects, a highway from Rangoon to Mandalay, went sour after a great deal had been expended in surveys and in initial studies of it, and ultimately that particular project was abandoned on the initiative of the Burmese – who said it was creating more ill will than good will – because it never seemed to be possible for our own government and for the Burmese government to get together an agreement on precisely what should be done. That project went on over a period when we had at least three ambassadors in Burma, I don't know how many Secretaries of State and Assistant Secretaries for the Far East and the rest, but it was always a changing cast of characters.

One of the characteristics of Burma was that, up until the time I left in '63, we had had no ambassador who had been there for longer than two years, and there was a great deal of in-and-out on this. So the continuity of United States influence in Burma was not very great, in that sense, because if you kept picking up with new people....And then there were some interim periods which were rather long between the assignments of ambassadors to Burma. And I think this had some effect, frankly, on our effectiveness there, that we had no degree of continuity. If we'd had people staying there a bit longer, I think our opportunities would have been greater.

But basically, from the point of view of the economic development of the country, this was not very promising, and as you view Burma today in contrast to Thailand, while you have the potential resources, you do not have anything like the kind of development which has occurred in Thailand. Well, equally promising in potential, but certainly not in what's actually happened.

O'BRIEN: Under Secretary Bowles came out at one point and had some talks with the government. Do you remember...

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EVERTON: Yes, that's right, and Dean Rusk was out on one occasion. No, I'm sorry, not Dean Rusk, his predecessor.

O'BRIEN: You mean, Herter [Christian A. Herter], or Dulles [John Foster Dulles]?

EVERTON: Dulles. Dulles. Dulles came out and was there only a very short time. We did not have, actually, in Burma – when I say “we” I mean the Burmese – did not have over a period of several years any substantial

amount of representation by high-level U.S. government officials. We didn't have anything like the kind of consultation that was going on in some other parts of Southeast Asia. Burma, I think, always tended to be somewhat peripheral to the mainstream. Bangkok, for example; Saigon, even in the earlier period when we were not as involved as we have been since from the military point of view, nevertheless, this was building up, this was a center of greater tension, of course; and Hong Kong, actually; but Burma, I think, was put in a rather peripheral role in terms of a sense of priorities as to where we could really have the most impact on the area.

Now I always thought personally and still do believe that it wasn't impossible, maybe, to have used Burma more effectively than we did, by virtue of her tradition of non-alignment and neutralism, as a bridge, if you please, in attempting to understand and to resolve some of the problems which confronted us in terms of the whole confrontation between the U.S. and China. And I don't think, really, that we probably made quite as effective use of Burma in this role as might have been possible.

O'BRIEN: Well, would you care to go into that whole development of the meeting between Harriman and Souvanna Phouma? As I understand it, you said that the Burmese had...

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EVERTON: This, historically, was really, I suppose, the place where the whole concept of how one could sustain a neutralist regime in Laos was worked out. So the negotiations, if they could be called that, were an attempt to see how one could make certain that you would sustain a neutralist regime and that the opposing forces would not simply result in the disintegration of the country itself. Recognizing strategically the importance of Laos, the discussions which went on there certainly did consider that, too – at least the solution which was accepted at that time. Whether it was successful or not is a matter of judgment for history.

O'BRIEN: How did the Burmese get involved in this?

EVERTON: The Burmese got involved partly because we – the U.S. government – were seeking for an appropriate place to meet. I think in all fairness we must acknowledge that we suggested that this might be an appropriate place, if the Burmese would be receptive to the idea. The Burmese were, and then they appropriately invited Souvanna Phouma from Laos and our own people to come in and have their meetings in Burma. And indeed, Souvanna Phouma was a guest of the government of Burma while he was there. The government of Burma hosted a number of social events for Souvanna Phouma and for Governor Harriman while they were there.

O'BRIEN: Do you recall anything of your own meetings with Governor Harriman during that time?

EVERTON: He stayed at the residence, and so we saw a fair amount of him in that particular period. I was personally most impressed, as I think many other people have been, both at the vigorous nature of the way in which he threw himself into discussions of this sort and also what I consider to be the very skillful way in which he handled these discussions, with great sensitivity. I have a very high regard for him, great respect for him. I think he's been one of our truly great public servants.

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O'BRIEN: Did he have a pretty clear idea of what he was going after at that point and what he wanted? Was he pushing, for example, a neutralization idea?

EVERTON: Yes, he was because clearly this was our concern; that feeling that this was the obvious solution for Laos at that point. And I think he succeeded in a large measure.

O'BRIEN: Were there any other meetings of this nature that took place with officials of the United States government and other nations?

EVERTON: No, not at this point. There were a number of abortive suggestions that Burma might be used as a site for discussions between China and ourselves, but these were never carried through.

O'BRIEN: Well, getting back to Bowles again; Bowles came out there in August of '61. What did he come out for?

EVERTON: Oh, Bowles was at that time in India and simply came over.

O'BRIEN: Ah, I see.

EVERTON: Right. Bowles had been over earlier when Dulles had been out there. He'd been interested in that whole area and so he came over at intervals. And then, of course, Bowles was also at the chief of missions conference in the Philippines, you know, in 1962 and came through that way at that time.

O'BRIEN: I guess the most important thing that happens – going into this chronologically – is the thing that happens in 1962, the coup. Were you caught completely unaware?

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EVERTON: Definitely so. It is a fair statement that there was no one in the embassy, let alone anyone outside the embassy, who was aware of what was going to happen. It happened very suddenly. The whole plan for it had been very well concealed, and it caught everyone by surprise. It was a bloodless coup; there was one man who was killed, but this was not intentional. It hadn't been planned that there would be any violence involved in it at all.

Of course, the aftermath of the coup affecting the University of Rangoon was the most serious part of the whole business, when between eighty and one hundred students were massacred by the Burmese military. And this was involved in relation to the radical student movement at that time on the campus, and the attempt on the part of General Ne Win's government to suppress it. This was a very sad occasion. It was the point at which the Buddhist way of nonviolence was not very evident; quite the contrary.

Although it's not really in sequence, I'd like to just say a word about when I met President Kennedy, and my impression of President Kennedy. And for the record, when I went in to see him before going out to Burma, I was enormously impressed by his own ability to relate to the problems of that particular small country, when you consider the fact that he was dealing with one hundred countries or more. He spoke very intelligently without any prompting or anybody by his side about the minority groups, about the insurgency problems, about the economic problems, about sensitivities from the point of view of the neutralist position of Burma, and the rest and seemed to have an extraordinarily good insight into what were really the essential critical points both in our own relationship with Burma and in what we would hope to do.

And it happened, also, that on that same morning – it was in the period just before he was planning to go to Vienna – he talked about that forthcoming visit and about what he hoped to accomplish by it; it was in the period when we were trading tractors for prisoners with Cuba, and he got involved in a discussion of this; he had a phone call from a Southern governor, and I have never heard anyone as forthright in really saying what he thought about the behavior of this Southern governor and about the impact of this on national interest.

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O'BRIEN: Who was this?

EVERTON: Wallace [George C. Wallace]. If anybody ever doubted that President Kennedy had strong feelings on the matter of civil rights and on race, one only had to listen as he picked up the phone in his office that morning. There were no reporters present so he wasn't doing this for the press, and it was a private conversation, I suppose, really, in effect – not totally private because I was there.

But I was enormously impressed by the forthrightness of the man and by the fact that within a relatively brief period he could be dealing with a domestic problem of great importance and several international problems of great importance. Of course, it was revealed very clearly to me what has been said so frequently, the very great interest that he had in foreign relations and in the whole question of our international involvement. And I think it's fair to say that – well, you'll see I'm a great admirer and have great respect for the late President – but I can't think of anyone, within a good long period, who has occupied the

White House was has had quite this deep sense of almost personal involvement, if you please. It's very remarkable. I was very proud to represent him.

O'BRIEN: Did you – in that time that you were at the White House and in the briefing time – did you get much of an opportunity to meet some of the other people involved in the White House operation?

EVERTON: I didn't meet many of them on that particular occasion; however, one or two of them who were there. But I'd met some of them earlier on in the course of briefings in Washington, and I met some of them later when I was back.

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O'BRIEN: I was thinking of people like Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] and Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] on foreign relations.

EVERTON: Yes. I'd known Mac Bundy before in his role at Harvard. And Rostow I'd also known before. Of course there were quite a few people at that time, one recalls, who were from the academic community; old colleagues in a new place.

O'BRIEN: Well, did you ever get any insights into the motivations of Ne Win in March of 1962?

EVERTON: Yes, I certainly did. I had very long conversations with him immediately after the coup and then subsequently, fourteen months later when I left Burma, I had a very long session with him. We talked at great length about what his objectives were for Burma.

At the time of the coup he said very directly that his concern was that the insurgency had been going on for fourteen years or more, and he felt this was divisive, and he felt there was even the danger that the whole thing might split apart, and they'd have no unity at all. And so he felt this was a very central problem that must be dealt with and dealt with soon if there was to be a vital future for Burma.

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He also was very much concerned about the lack of progress on the economic front. He attributed part of this – rightly or wrongly – to the fact that they had so many Indians and Chinese and foreign nationals involved in business and industry and seemed to have a feeling that if you could only get this into the Burmese hands, why surely it would be better.

But the economic problem and the problem of dissension and disunity, these were two of the major problems; and third, as I indicated earlier, he did imply that he felt that U Nu had not followed a strictly neutralist line and that his neutralism had not been quite as clear when he was dealing with China, for example, as it was when he was dealing with the

United States or with U.K. [United Kingdom] and that he was intending to pursue a much more definite line of “positive neutralism”, as he calls it.

Now, the irony of it is that – that’s 1962 – seven years later very little of what he set out to accomplish has been accomplished. What has actually happened: insurgency is still going on; from an economic point of view, the condition is much worse today than it was then. They were exporting 2.8 million at the highest point of exports for rice, and they were down, this last year, to 250,000 tons. And on teak, the story is the same. So Burma, at the moment, is in a rather precarious position economically. The insurgency is the sort of thing which flows back and forth and comes and goes, and it may be that the whole question of the survival of the Union was not quite as acute a question at the time he took over as he made it out to be. Somehow or other, it has managed to survive.

O’BRIEN: In your own role you’ve been fairly friendly with U Nu. Did you feel any embarrassment or uneasiness with the transition of governments taking place like this? In other words, how are your relations with Ne Win?

[-21-]

EVERTON: Well, my relations with Ne Win, it’d be fair to say, were as good as those of our ambassadors, other diplomatic representatives from other countries. Ne Win took a position that he was not going to spend very much time on the diplomatic corps, and he didn’t. But there was no discernible difference in his attitude toward the American ambassador than any of the other ambassadors there. Actually, I was very frank with Ne Win when he came in and said I’d had a number of friends from the previous regime. Those that are not behind the bars, I’m not supposed to simply ignore them and forget that I’d ever seen them, but assured him that any relationship there would be on a purely personal basis.

As a matter of fact, I was the one who had the responsibility of recommending that we recognize the new regime. When the questions were put – as they need be in a situation of that sort – as to whether you consider this a regime which will last and one where we should sustain a relationship with, I could only report that I believed this was the case. This didn’t mean to say that we were thoroughly sympathetic with the new regime, but it was, in fact, the regime that was governing Burma, and therefore, if we were to have any relationship at all with Burma, we must be related to it.

O’BRIEN: Were these the things – that you just mentioned – that were on the minds of people in Washington, as well as in Rangoon in the embassy, as far as recognition of the government?

EVERTON: Yes, I think a primary concern was: What are the intentions of the new regime? How stable is it? Will he be able to sustain his position, coming to power as he did through a coup d’etat? And of course, it was a position which was not an easy one for many people who’d known the Burmese and who’d had a close sense of identity with the former government, government officials,

cabinet, and the rest. Over the long period of detention, of protective custody over several years, this was not easy.

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Now, I've been back in Burma every year, up until this year, for shorter or longer periods of time. I've been very careful on these visits going back not – after he was released from custody – to see U Nu, for example, or to see other political leaders. I simply, correctly I think, visited the foreign office and U Thi Han, the foreign minister, and others that I knew and have been very careful, as an ex-ambassador, the former ambassador, to not do anything which could be misconstrued in the minds of the Burmese and to make it clear, as I have, that my visits have been purely private visits.

I do not understand the basis for U Nu's present intentions because it doesn't seem to ring true to what he said – or appeared to – earlier on. I think I understand his intentions; I think he wants to overthrow the Ne Win regime. But you may recall that here, I believe, he stated that he hoped the United States would remain neutral on this question.

O'BRIEN: Well, in this nationalization process that takes place – of course, it ranges rather far, all the way to the oil industry, for example – how is this received in the embassy? Are we concerned about the direction in which this is going?

EVERTON: Oh, very, very definitely so, yes, and it would be altogether false to say that there wasn't a good deal of concern in the period of nationalization. This had all kinds of indirect repercussions. I mean, when you started ousting the British and the Indians and the others, countries where we had friendly relations, as well as our friendly relationships with the Burmese, we couldn't be altogether comfortable under those circumstances. Also, in the embassy, we were very much concerned when they put colonels and other military officers in charge of the banks and in charge of businesses – with no background in money and banking, many of them with no background in business administration, business management – because we didn't feel that they really had the capability to carry on. And I think that subsequent events have demonstrated this rather clearly.

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Now, the one thing that I think might be added here to clarify what happened with the coup d'etat, was the fact that historically, as in so many countries from the Middle East on out, the Burmese were, I suppose, making an attempt at an experiment – whatever one wishes to call it – of developing a democratic system for Burma. Democracies are not built overnight. I think that both we and they were probably a little naïve in thinking one could do it this easily or this quickly, having moved from a colonial position and from one of strong central controls, to one where you had a truly democratic process at work. And consequently, they became disillusioned, as they have in many other places. And then when you turn to any strong authoritarian group, which could possibly control the situation, you

instinctively look around and probably the only group you find under those circumstances will be the military. That's all. This is where they turn.

But I think it's going to be interesting, historically, if we take a long enough perspective on this, to see what the full implications are of military takeover. In Pakistan, for example, they managed to work out a new constitution, you know. It's happened differently in different places. When and will Burma return to civilian rule, and if it does, what will be the nature of that government? Will it be another attempt at a democratic form? I don't know. But I find it interesting to look at it objectively in the context of what has gone on in so many of the newly independent nations. And what's happened in Burma is by no means unique. It's part of the pattern which has occurred straight across. The only elements of uniqueness would be the extent to which the Burmese people themselves have unique characteristics, but apart from that, it's a very common political phenomenon that has occurred.

My own feeling is that ultimately they will return to civilian rule. My own feeling is that ultimately they'll make another stab at a democratic form of government. How soon this will come, it's very difficult to say.

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O'BRIEN: Well, while you were there did the Department ask you to make any representations or gentle hints, anything along these lines, in the direction of elections and the opening up of the political process?

EVERTON: Yes, right. The position that we took at the time of the coup was that we did not question the right of Burma to go at a more accelerated pace towards the Burmese way of socialism. What we did question was the infringement on the rights of individuals to participate in decision-making, and the fact that this was done arbitrarily and in an authoritarian fashion and without either the consent of the public or any attempt to gain consensus on what should be done. So it was this, really, which concerned us, plus the fact that we were also concerned that there should be no civilian representation in it. And one other point which I made very strongly was that in the history of economic affairs if you have simply state monopolies and if you have a completely nationalized economy, this is not a very healthy thing. But they had had previously in Burma a mixed economy and a certain amount of competition, which we believe is healthy. I was urging General Ne Win to give serious consideration as to whether or not he shouldn't have, indeed, in some elements of the economy, at least, some opportunity for free enterprise, even though, granted, he might feel for the most part it should be in the hands of the state. I thought if he did, he might have a somewhat healthier situation than what prevails if it's totally nationalized.

O'BRIEN: In this nationalization that took place, I was thinking, in one particular instance in the oil industry, that Stanvac [Standard Vacuum Oil Co.] and Caltex [California Texas Corporation] still have small operations there, don't they?

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EVERTON: That's correct. The place where it began was with the banks. We didn't have any banks there. We'd had an American bank there in the prewar period, but it was never reestablished after the war.

One of the interesting sidelights of what happened during this particular period was the fact that we had a U.S. trade mission out there that was there, believe it or not, from before the coup d'etat and was still there after the coup had occurred, and they were still discussing with the Burmese what possibilities there were for investment. It's been interesting, subsequently, to encounter some of the members of that trade mission and to talk with them about their experience. They worked to a very great extent with Brigadier Aung Gyi, who was at the time number two in the military and who was subsequently ousted by General Ne Win. And they were all enormously impressed by Aung Gyi and felt he had a good grasp of what was needed from the economic point of view and felt that his departure from the government was a very sad blow for Ne Win. But I think it was a very simple thing; you couldn't have two strong men. And Ne Win had to be "the general" and he had to be in charge, and Aung Gyi was too independent in his thought and in his statements, and you simply couldn't accept this in a totalitarian regime.

O'BRIEN: Were you ever asked to get involved in behalf of, let's say, some of these companies that were nationalized that were of American...

EVERTON: No, because we didn't have significant investment in Burma at that time, so there was no major problem of disentangling, disengaging, and of getting out if we could any American resources. We were not in a position that we would have been in in a lot of other countries, where we had a very substantial investment. American investment in Burma was minimal. For one thing, the Burmese had not offered very good guarantees. This was one of the subjects that we discussed at intervals with the Burmese prior to the coup and attempted to see if we could negotiate better assurances and guarantees.

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O'BRIEN: When was the Ford Foundation, in a sense, picked up and kicked out?

EVERTON: Well, it was Ford and Asia Foundation. I think it was really due primarily to the sponsorship of the Asia Foundation and that this rubbed off on Ford. General Ne Win felt he couldn't let the one go and leave the other there. I don't honestly think that it was at all reflecting on Ford, per se, but it was the fact that Asia had a name foundation that was ostensibly a private foundation and so on. And he had not linked this operation from the beginning because when it was Committee for Free Asia, he vowed if there was ever an opportunity for him to get it out, he would. So when he came to power, he did. And this rubbed off then to Ford, too.

O'BRIEN: As Ambassador, did the embassy get involved in the movement towards an agreement, which I understood took place, between Thailand and Burma over border problems, the whole border thing?

EVERTON: Yes, we did, and we were very much interested in that. We got involved only to the point of encouraging the Burmese and the Thais to work out suitable border agreements. It was very much in our interest because the Kuomintang were running opium across the border and in the teak industry, logs were being smuggled across the border. There was a great deal of interchange back and forth, and indeed, various insurgent groups of the ethnic minority groups would be slipping over into Thailand, back and forth. And so we thought it was in our own best interests for them to have a much tighter situation with respect to the border and a better agreement than they'd had heretofore.

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O'BRIEN: How about Burma's participation in a number of these regional organizations, not only with the underdeveloped nations but in Southeast Asia as well?

EVERTON: Well of course, the Burmese, as I suspect you know, were very unsympathetic to any regional association, particularly if they thought that that regional association had been developed by external initiative. And they felt that SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] was not an actual Southeast Asian association, that this was brought about by the larger powers; and so they would have nothing to do with it, in fact, were highly suspicious of it all the way through. They felt – “they” being both U Nu and, subsequently, Ne Win – that if you were to have any sorts of interrelationships that they ought to grow up spontaneously and naturally in terms of bilateral agreements between two countries, in the first instance, and then have something more come of it. So they did not take an active part in this sort of thing.

Now, on the other hand – I think this should be mentioned because it's part of the whole picture and we were obviously very interested in it (“we” being our own government) – the Burmese had a higher per capita rate of people who were involved in international agencies than almost any other country one could think of. You had U Nyun in ECAFE [Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East]; you had Thant [U Thant] over here, of course; you had people in the World Bank [International Bank for Reconstruction and Development], and the Monetary Fund [International Monetary Fund]. A great many Burmese are in quite responsible positions internationally. In terms of the size of population, it was way out of proportion.

And the Burmese did feel sympathetic towards the U.N. and its affiliated agencies; they felt sympathetic towards the Colombo Plan [Council for Technical Cooperation in South and Southeast Asia], which they regarded as local in character. They were much more sympathetic to receiving aid through multilateral sources than through unilateral sources. It bothered them if they were receiving substantial aid from a single country because they felt that strings were attached. They felt that multilateral aid through international agencies was

clear of those same obligations.

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O'BRIEN: Well, I have a couple of general administrative things, but before we get into them, is there anything that we've simply skipped over that you feel...

EVERTON: No, I don't think so, really. I think basically, to recap, Burma has been historically, for a long while, peripheral in terms of our own foreign policy. After the military coup d'etat, it was more of a holding operation than anything else. And this is true during the term of my successor, Byroade [Henry A. Byroade], and is still true today. Our government staff there and various agencies were cut very substantially. We were restricted in our USIA [United States Information Agency] program and other programs so that our representation there was very modest in size, very low-key, and simply trying to sustain our friendly relationship with the Burmese. And I don't think, probably, in the minds of the policy-makers, then or now, that they accepted the fact that Burma had any very strategic role to play. This varied from time to time with different conditions, and some would admit that Burma might be useful in certain categories, but basically, this was not where the action was, for the most part.

O'BRIEN: Well in regard, first of all, to your own embassy: Did you get pretty good cooperation out of that embassy? Was it a pretty effective...

EVERTON: Excellent cooperation. I had extraordinarily good people there. I was very much impressed, as a non-career man, by some of the career people, the professionals, who were there.

O'BRIEN: Who were some of the professionals that you were particularly impressed with?

EVERTON: Well, my chief political officer, Richard Erwing, my chief military attaché, the chief of CIA, in particular, was an extraordinarily good man.

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O'BRIEN: May we get into the names of some of these people?

EVERTON: I don't think I want to mention their names, particularly; you can look them up if you want to. But these were all very good people, really. But I was particularly interested that the CIA representation there, while it was modest in size – the caliber of the people they sent out. They were very well-informed. They were probably the best qualified in language. They served, of course, in various departments within the embassy, in political affairs, in economic affairs, and so on –

very useful people.

And in the military establishment, Colonel Haze [James G. Haze, Jr.], for example, was very exceptional in the way in which he got involved in community affairs. He was chairman of the board of the community school, the international school, doing a variety of things of this sort in addition to his intelligence work.

Well, it was a good embassy, basically, and I'm sure that we had some of the problems that you always encounter when you've got a nonprofessional working with professionals; and this was anticipated that this would be the case. But basically, on the whole, relationships were very good. I don't think it was so heavily overstaffed, as some of our embassies have been, according to the recent studies that have been made – I don't think we ever had quite that large an establishment, really.

O'BRIEN: Did you put the country team plan into effect?

EVERTON: We did and took this very seriously.

O'BRIEN: And you were kept pretty well informed of all the activities?

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EVERTON: Definitely so. I'm fully persuaded that there were no activities directly within Burma that I didn't know about. There might have been some that were across the border somewhere else, but certainly not within Burma. No, I thought the country team concept was a good concept.

O'BRIEN: Did the CIA get involved with youth groups or in any way supporting political parties or any members of the opposition?

EVERTON: Not very much. They were mostly interested, as any other group there, in smoking out what the relationships were with China and the other communist countries. In the process of this, of course, they'd be talking with people who were in different sectors of the society.

O'BRIEN: Burma is a key listening post, isn't it?

EVERTON: Yes, it has been right along. For this reason, I suppose, I would have to retract a little bit my earlier statement, that it was very peripheral in terms of the strategy and emphasis because from this point of view, clearly, it was quite important.

O'BRIEN: Well, now on relationships not with the embassy but with the Department in those years, did you have any major problems that came up in the embassy with the Department?

EVERTON: No, I'd say our chief problem was between AID and the embassy. I would say this was based to a very large extent on the lack of political sensitivity on the part of the Agency for International Development. This is pretty characteristic even today. In the country where I am now, why, I have to deal with AID and State, and in the case of AID I find that their objectives and their interests are quite different and they seem to, to a very large extent,

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ignore national interest, which is very central on the part of State. It's interesting if you go into the Agency for International Development and talk with a number of people there, and then you go into the State Department and talk to people there, you get a quite different impression. And this was true in the case of Burma. They were not politically sensitive, and they were not as well qualified for international operations. And if you take, for example, just to use one measure, linguistic ability or language just to use one measure, linguistic ability or language training, CIA was best qualified – the military and the CIA, about the same probably; then, after that, it would be State; then, some of those in USIS; and then, finally, AID.

O'BRIEN: The language is a major problem.

EVERTON: That's right, yeah. Well, they couldn't communicate very much, really. Nor do I think that AID had any very substantial grasp on the problems of the area, really, basically. I think they tended to generalize on some of the problems of development that you can find in different countries, and I don't think they particularized enough in terms of the unique special factors which were characteristic of that country. Now, let me hasten to say, that the man I got after I was out there for eight months as my director of my AID program, this doesn't apply to him at all. And he'd been out there earlier on as engineering consultant – Donald Barnes – and here in Washington in the engineering section. But he was atypical, quite different than the average run.

O'BRIEN: Well, did you have a feeling that your writing and your communications to Washington were being read?

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EVERTON: Yes, I certainly did. All of them, very definitely so. No, I think your primary problem here is a built-in one: Everything that comes out from Washington is signed by Rusk; everything that goes in from the embassy is signed by the ambassador; and it's sometimes difficult to sort out who the author is, this particular idea. But this is a problem you get whenever you have a home agency and a field agency and whenever you have the chief officer of each as the responsible party for signing.

O'BRIEN: What went into your decision to leave?

EVERTON: My decision to leave was not entirely my decision to leave because I was coming home on home leave at the end of my two-year stint there. The pattern in Burma, as I mentioned earlier, up until that time had been two-year assignments, and this had been fairly common in Southeast Asia, and it was pretty much assumed that at the end of two years, why, someone else came in. But I think part of it was the fact that the State Department thought it would be interesting to see whether if you put a military man in there, a man with a military background, he could have more communication with the General. And so this was clearly one of the reasons, at least I'm sure, that Henry Byroade, who had formerly been a general out in that area, was appointed ambassador, although there was a fair hiatus between my departure and his arrival, which was true in almost every instance.

But, you know, it was one of those circumstances where it was not possible with that regime to feel that you were able to do a whale of a lot because of the lack of receptivity and responsiveness on the part of the regime and the constant diminishing of the programs, U.S. government programs, which we had. So you were to some extent frustrated because you couldn't really have as active a role as you had under the previous regime. And, you know, this is never totally satisfying when that happens.

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The Burmese people are a people that you develop a great affection for, and you forgive them a great deal because of what they are. And in terms of just living there, and living with the Burmese people, nothing could be more delightful. But after all, you're there to do a job, and that job was rendered quite difficult by General Ne Win and his cohorts. All the signals that I'd gone out under were changed because I had gone out because I did know U Nu and the cabinet, you see. And then, also, when he decided to terminate the Ford Foundation programs, I was not happy about that decision. So the situation was substantially changed. Of course, I did stay for fourteen months thereafter, and modestly, I think, we were able to undertake a decent holding action. But you didn't feel that you were able to make a great deal of progress under those circumstances.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get the feeling that the ambassadors like yourself, who were very close to Ambassador Bowles, might have been singled out for replacement in 1963?

EVERTON: I really have no way of knowing.

O'BRIEN: At all?

EVERTON: I mean, I don't know how one would be able to....

O'BRIEN: It's just a thought that crossed my mind.

EVERTON: It's quite conceivable; it's quite possible, but I just don't know. I have no reason to believe that, at any time, the Department was less than satisfied with what I was doing. I mean, there was never any indication of this at any time. One thing which was not done, which I think in retrospect could have been done: Right after the coup d'etat I did not come home for consultations, and I think this would have been very helpful and very valuable. No initiative was taken on the part of the Department,

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and so I didn't take any initiative from that end to suggest it. Of course, one has to remember that I'd been home just before that on consultation on the AID problems, and so this may have been one of the factors. But I think normally when you have as much of an about-face as that, why, the normal procedure would be to call the ambassador home and sit down and say, "What does it all mean?" and "Where do we go from here?" And this didn't happen. So all of our reporting on the coup was at long distance. And no one came out from State, as I recall, at that point, to take a first-month look at it, either.

O'BRIEN: Was there anything that we've left out or anything that you feel that we could discuss more deeply or...

EVERTON: I don't think so. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience; it gave me a much deeper understanding of foreign policy and of how we operate and of decision-making processes. Obviously, it's the sort of thing you can read about, but until you get involved in it, you can't fully appreciate what it's all about. I'd been there as a private citizen and came back in public service, because I'm sure there were a lot of strange types who were coming into the embassy who never would have set foot in the embassy, except for the fact that they were people that I'd known in my last years as Ford Foundation representative. And these earlier friends were still sustained, along with those that one would normally be meeting in the context of the role as ambassador. So it made it a little unusual.

O'BRIEN: When was the last time you saw the President?

EVERTON: The President? The present President?

O'BRIEN: President Kennedy.

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EVERTON: Oh, President Kennedy. I did not see him when I came back. I didn't see him when I returned to this country. And, of course, that was very few months before the assassination. But obviously, I had discussions with Rusk and with Harriman – Averell – and with many other people and the usual debriefings with various agencies.

O'BRIEN: Do you recall anything of those debriefings?

EVERTON: No, the only thing I recall is that I thought the House Committee on Foreign Affairs at that time was really a rather good committee. I don't know, it may just have been....I can't recall now, really, too much of the makeup of the Committee, but apparently there were one or two people on it who had some deep interest in the area, and so the conversation was somewhat more substantive than before going out.

O'BRIEN: Well, thank you, Ambassador Everton.

EVERTON: Not at all.

O'BRIEN: A very pleasant, informative interview.

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