

Foy Kohler Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 10/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Foy Kohler

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Biographical Note

Foy Kohler (1908-1990) was the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs from 1959 to 1962 and the Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1962 to 1966. This oral statement focuses on diplomatic relations with European countries, in particular the Soviet Union, during the Kennedy administration.

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Transcript of Oral History Interview

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By: Foy D. Kohler

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

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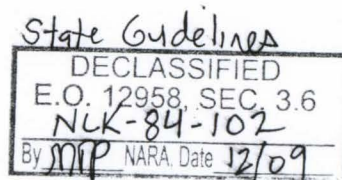
October 1964

Transcript of tape from Ambassador Foy Kohler for the Oral History of the Kennedy Library

In what follows I attempt to give my impressions of my relationships with the late President Kennedy. Much of what I say will touch on classified matters and should not be used in a public way without clearance with the Department of State. I have been guided in these remarks by a desk record showing my actual meetings with the President after his inauguration on January 20, but revealing no details on subjects. Also, the pertinent documents are not available to me here, but I have in any case not attempted to cover the substance of conversations either directly with the President, or conversations which the President had with others in my presence, which are a matter of record in the files of the White House or of the State Department. Unfortunately, I have no record at all of the numerous telephone calls which I had from the President, particularly during the early months of his incumbency.

I had of course been familiar with the then Senator Kennedy, but had not actually met him, nor had he been present on occasions when I happened to be called upon to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The first word I had from him was an indirect one. Before the inauguration and after the designation of Dean Rusk as Secretary of State in the Kennedy Administration, the Secretary set up provisional offices in the State Department and conferred with a number of us. On a Saturday afternoon in January 1961, he called me in and told me that the Administration wished me to stay on in my position as Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs. In doing so he said that he was talking for the President personally and that he wanted me to know that the request was a carefully studied one and that I had been thoroughly checked out.

After January 20, my first contact with the President himself, as it turned out, was by telephone. The Portuguese ship, the Santa Maria, had been seized by Portuguese rebels in the Atlantic and great consternation arose as many of the passengers were Americans. The American Navy and Air Force both participated in efforts to get the ship to shore somewhere and save the passengers. The President showed great interest, the interest indeed of an old sailor, in these efforts. While he was normally briefed directly by the State Department, there were occasions on off hours when he picked up the telephone and asked for me.



The first meeting with him was on the occasion when I took the newly appointed Ambassador to Belgium in to have a farewell visit before proceeding to his post. This was typical of a number of my contacts during the next few months with the President when I was present in my capacity as Assistant Secretary of State, either to present to him outgoing American diplomats or to be with him on the occasion of his meetings with a whole succession of European statesmen who were anxious to establish prompt relationships with the new Administration. The latter included, first, the Danish Prime Minister, followed shortly thereafter by German Minister of Foreign Affairs von Brentano, later by the President of the French National Assembly Chaban-Delmas, and by Berlin Mayor Willi Brandt.

Then followed a trip with the President to Key West to meet with British Prime Minister Macmillan and participation later in the meetings which the President had in April with Macmillan in Washington. Meanwhile, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko had paid his first call, on which occasion I also attended the President. Later in April Chancellor Adenauer came to Washington, then Walter Hallstein of the European Communities. All of this preceded the first major trip that the President made himself. The general pattern on these occasions was that I would be at the White House fifteen minutes to a half hour before the meeting with a given visitor for the purpose of briefing the President. The actual period of the briefing was usually somewhat less than this, as the President had an extremely busy schedule. The first impression I had was the rapidity and brilliance of his mind in grasping the essential facts that he would need in these talks with his foreign visitors and outgoing American diplomats. Sometimes he had been unable to read the briefing papers in advance so he could scan them, but he could scan them and retain the essence of them in a matter of just a minute or two. He then supplemented these briefings by asking me the proper questions. My admiration grew as to the ease, the confidence, and the perception with which he handled these early conversations with a host of diplomats representing countries of the most varied kind and with the most varied interests.

I particularly recall the dexterity with which he handled Chancellor Adenauer, and his perception of the really important point in the existing state of our relationship with the Federal Republic. Adenauer as usual was insisting on unequivocal assurances or, rather, reassurances, as to American support of the Federal Republic

and our willingness to face up to the most drastic action, if required, for the protection of the Republic. The President quickly saw that in fact Adenauer, while demanding a great deal from us, was not committing himself as to Germany's role. He pressed his point home very effectively, and I think it marked a certain turning point in Adenauer's approach to his relationship with us, making it much more realistic and leading to a more effective buildup of German forces and more effective support from the Germans in our balance-of-payments problem. During all this period the President, partly out of his own make-up, partly stimulated, I think, by the conversations he had had with European statesmen, was intent on reviewing exactly where the United States stood; first, on the problem of Germany; how we stood in the NATO alliance; and, finally, what we could do about our relationship with the Soviet Union. He called in former Secretary of State Dean Acheson (I may say to the great delight of those of us who had worked with him before), and we were busy, on the President's instructions, with the most intensive possible review of all the contingency planning that had taken place with respect to possible happenings in Germany, or in Berlin, or on the autobahn, or in the air corridors, and with a review of our own contributions to NATO as against those of our allies. The President wanted, and received, frequent briefings on these matters; and the members of the Acheson group, both on Germany and Berlin and on NATO matters, had frequent meetings. The principal spokesman was, of course, Acheson. But the President always asked a lot of pertinent questions, sometimes addressed to me directly.

On the question of Soviet relationships, it seemed to me that he had in mind from the beginning the desirability of an early meeting face to face with Soviet Chairman Khrushchev, and the making of plans for this was accordingly an easy matter. The President rightly decided that this encounter would have to be combined with appropriate meetings with Allies; consequently we worked out a program combining a visit to de Gaulle and Paris with a meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna, and then a brief stop in England on the way back. This was a great adventure with the President on which I embarked, along with many other advisers, of course, on May 31, 1961, returning approximately a week later. Reams have been written about this trip and the records are voluminous. I shall not attempt to go into any substance. It is clear to me, however, that Khrushchev was out to cow this young man. The President gradually realized this. He regarded the meeting as a very somber experience and drew from it the essential conclusions as to how it would be

necessary to deal with the Soviets in a way that would at once protect the vital interests of the West and avoid a direct confrontation between the two countries. His action after his return home was in a sense foreshadowed by the way he handled himself in the Vienna meeting -- with dignity, frankness, determination, but yet with admirable statesmanlike restraint in the face of considerable provocation.

Following our return to Washington, the President directed a redoubled effort to get all our ducks in a row with respect to German planning and related problems. Some very intensive work ensued. He and Secretary Rusk decided that I should be relieved of many of my duties in the Bureau of European Affairs generally and concentrate on the German task. The development of our own positions and contingency planning during this period, including the military buildup, brought many meetings with the President, one of which stays in my memory particularly vividly. As the continuity factor in connection with the problem of Germany, I felt it incumbent upon me to explain and indeed to defend the plans which had been developed over the past years for contingencies likely to arise in Germany or on the access routes. The key point which arose was the question of the stage at which contingency action should be put into effect on the autobahn, specifically, the methods by which a turnover from Soviet to East German control would be handled. Existing contingency planning had called for the initiation of armed probes on the autobahn at the moment of any turnover. This earlier decision had a very good rationale in itself since such turnover would be a dramatic and highly publicized defiance of the Western powers. The move would, of course, inevitably have precipitated a showdown at the first moment of such a Soviet initiative. Mr. Dean Acheson was opposed to this decision, feeling that other procedures should be developed which would in fact allow the allies to accept East German police presence on the autobahn as a relatively unimportant factor, leaving the initiation of armed probes to the point of any actual interference with our movements to and from Berlin.

It was typical of the President that he heard the argument out personally in a large meeting in the upstairs sitting room in the White House, at which we all spoke our pieces, with myself acting as a spokesman for the existing planning in the event the President's decision was for a change in the planning. I, of course, accepted the decision which, in the light of events since that time, was clearly

much more prudent than the continuation of the existing plans. Consequently, after this decision was made, our new positions were developed in great detail, under the very direct supervision of the President.

Then towards the end of July 1961, I was sent to Paris for an intensive quadripartite meeting at which the new plans were put to our allies and, after considerable discussion, accepted by them. By this time, the President was calling me by my first name, and I suppose he had had enough experience with me to satisfy himself as to my dependability and, presumably, ability. In any event he made life easy and indeed stimulating by the way in which he and the Secretary of State with him put their confidence in me. I comment on this, not because of my own role, but because it was typical of the ability of President Kennedy to use people and get the most out of them. His dealings with me, and this extension of his confidence and readiness to place responsibility on a relatively not very high ranking officer of the Administration certainly produced the best that I could give to such a President. It should be added, of course, at this point that the President's preference for direct operations was both reflected in and facilitated by the steps he took with respect to the organization within the White House for the handling of foreign affairs and related national security matters.

The first step of course was the abolition of the old Operations Coordinating Board and the establishment of Mr. McGeorge Bundy as his chief of staff for foreign policy matters to keep in direct contact with the officers concerned throughout the government. Mr. Bundy was a direct channel for communication of our ideas to the President and for the coordination of those ideas and even for bringing us into the White House to discuss things directly with the President.

Within the context of this general review of the development of my own relations with the President, I might go on to comment on some specific subjects. The first, I think, might be the question of the Berlin Wall closely related to much of the previous work that we had done in preparing for contingencies. The President, like all the rest of us engaged in this affair, was clearly disappointed by the lack of firm prior intelligence when, on the night of August 12 to 13, the East Germans, with Soviet backing, started erecting this formidable barrier through the heart of the great city of Berlin. A number of us

were called in first thing on the morning of the 13th and arrived in fact before the President had dressed or had his breakfast, so we were received in his bedroom. There was a considerable discussion there, but despite his disappointment the President lost no time dwelling on this disappointment about the lack of intelligence. He was quick to grasp the essential fact that our problem was a psychological one and with respect to the reactions of the West Germans in particular and of all Germans in general, since obviously neither in the President's mind nor in the contingency planning had it ever been contemplated that East Berlin itself was a casus belli. The early morning meeting in the bedroom, which led to the issuance of a strong statement, was promptly followed by a series of meetings during the week as to how to handle the new situation. In these meetings the President's sensitivity to political and psychological factors of this kind kept the work focused on this essential problem of how to reassure the Germans. In a matter of a few days decisions were reached to strengthen the garrison in West Berlin by the addition of a battalion which would proceed there across the autobahn, and by the dispatch of then Vice President Johnson to the city.

It was the President's personal idea to add General Clay, former Commandant in Berlin during the Berlin airlift days, to this expedition, and to designate him as the President's personal representative to stay on in Berlin as a kind of super-Commandant whose presence would continue to provide reassurance to the population of the city and of West Germany. It seems that General Clay had been in touch with the President and that the President had quickly realized both the General's potential usefulness in this respect and also the possible dangers of having him on the outside as a critic. Looking back at it now, I consider the President's use of General Clay during this very tense period as a masterpiece in the handling of men. It was clear to me that the President's own concept of the essential problems in Berlin and Germany and of how to deal with these was poles apart from that of General Clay. From time to time, in fact, as General Clay remained in Berlin and was responsible for some rather violent initiatives, I think the President was a bit nervous about what the results might be. On the other hand, he managed to keep these initiatives of General Clay reasonably in check and to keep General Clay fairly well satisfied as to the firmness of his own, that is, the President's, intentions. In retrospect Clay's presence there, difficult as it may have been for the local commandant and for the members of the U. S. Mission in Berlin, certainly played a useful

role in demonstrating our determination and the firmness of our purpose, and I am sure had a considerable influence on Soviet reactions.

Another subject which seems to me to require some special comment is that of the President's relationships with some of the leading members of the Diplomatic Corps in Washington. The President and Mrs. Kennedy had known the David Ormsby Gores, the British Ambassador and his wife, previously. Likewise, I am sure they had known the Alphands, the French Ambassador. They liked both of them and found them congenial. In addition, I believe the President liked to test some of his own ideas from a foreign point of view. Consequently, he saw these two men rather frequently, a fact which became fairly well known around Washington. He also was interested in seeing the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoliy Dobrynin, from time to time. We were very grateful for this latter because it meant that Ambassador Thompson in Moscow could also from time to time expect to see Chairman Khrushchev.

The President could not of course see all the scores of members of the Diplomatic Corps, and his closer relationship to these leading members led to a certain amount of heartburning around the Corps in Washington. This was particularly striking in the case of the German Ambassador, Professor Wilhelm Grewe, a rather pedantic man with very little sense of humor. Ambassador Grewe felt that his own prestige required that he see the President approximately as frequently as, well, at least as the French Ambassador did. Consequently, he would put in for appointments when in fact he had no really substantive business to discuss. I believe this procedure led to the eventual downfall of the Ambassador in the form of his transfer to another post and his replacement in Washington. Since there was not much on the agenda for the President to discuss with Ambassador Grewe on a given occasion, the President decided that this would be a good opportunity to promote the campaign he had undertaken to get other countries to purchase UN bonds. He accordingly broached the subject to Ambassador Grewe and urged very strongly that the Federal Government, despite its non-membership in the UN, subscribe to these bonds. Ambassador Grewe saw fit to link this with an old and stale question known under the rubric of "vested assets," that is, German private property which had been seized during the war. While the Germans had agreed in the post-war settlements to write off these particular assets, which amounted to some 200 million dollars in value, Adenauer, under pressure from the interested German parties,

had earlier raised the issue with then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and had received a sort of commitment in principle that, in the interest of preserving the sanctity of private property, the United States would consider the return of these assets to Germany on a pro gratia basis. The question had been reviewed by the Kennedy Administration and the Ambassador had previously been informed, both by the State Department and by the White House, that the question was closed and that this Administration did not consider itself under any obligation to achieve the return of these assets. Even so, Grewe saw fit to raise the subject with the President. As he was leaving from this particular interview the President made a joking remark linking the two matters. Without any check with me or with Mr. Hillenbrand, who had taken the notes of this conversation, Grewe took this to be an offer for return of the vested assets against German purchases of UN bonds. He reported it seriously in this sense to his own government, recommending that it be accepted. After he committed himself, Grewe became very embarrassed when he finally realized that the President's remark had been made in jest. Despite this, he managed in a subsequent interview to leave the impression with the President that he, the President, had been at fault for the misunderstanding. From then on it was clear that the Ambassador's welcome to the White House could only be pro forma and in line of official duty. In due course the German government realized this, and Ambassador Grewe was recalled.

Another subject of recurrent briefings, discussions, and interest was the question of United States relationships with the Eastern European countries, commonly referred to as the Soviet satellites. Those of us who had to do with this question were encouraged by the President's realistic views. He seemed clearly to realize that the so-called liberation policy was bankrupt, especially after the failure of the United States and the West to take any effective action in connection with the Polish and Hungarian uprisings. He appreciated that the real way to make progress toward our goals in Eastern Europe required a policy of penetration, of increasing influence, and, in general, of maneuver. However, his realistic appreciation of the situation developing in these countries ran into established prejudices and political influences at home, and in practice he was not able to operate as effectively in this field as we had hoped. One of the obstacles

to developing a more flexible Eastern European policy had been a Congressional Resolution passed in 1959 calling for Presidential proclamation of a so-called "Captive Nations Week." At first the President agreed to our recommendation that an annual proclamation was not required. However, pressures mounted, and in the end he did feel constrained to honor this particular Congressional Resolution again. It is true that he toned the language down more than previously, but the fact that he felt constrained to continue the practice made the conduct of a forward policy more difficult. However, within the limitations of what he thought he could do politically, he continued to fight this battle for increasing our contacts and our trade with Eastern European countries, and went to considerable lengths in this respect to frustrate the application of the amendment denying most-favored-nation treatment to Poland and Yugoslavia.

I was of course not privy to the factors which went into the President's decision to appoint me to the post of Ambassador to the Soviet Union, although I was certainly grateful when I was informed of that decision by the Secretary of State. Understandably, it was not a matter which the President would discuss with me personally in advance. And even when I saw him for the first time after the news, I was hardly able to express my appreciation for the appointment. The President took the air of taking the whole matter for granted and immediately started to discuss with me the complex problems of Soviet American relationships. After my departure from Washington and en route to Moscow in August 1962, however much I operated under the President's instructions, my personal contacts became rather rare. I had a good talk with him in February 1963 when I was at home briefly on consultation. My last talk and my last visit with him was in September 1963 during my second visit to the States. This was a fairly long talk which is a matter of record, and was my last view of the President before his assassination. On that occasion I found him most alert, extremely interested in Soviet/American problems, and anxious to push forward and maintain the momentum which we had developed during the summer in the wake of the Cuba crisis. The memory of this rather recent visit made even more poignant the shocking news of his assassination and death a couple of months later.

During the process of trying to record these impressions, I have been increasingly aware of their inadequacy and insufficiency to express either the personality of the President or the President's effect upon me personally. I have found that without aids to memory

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it is difficult to keep one's thoughts in chronological order and to recall specific situations, expressions, or words. I hope, however, that these remarks will be a contribution to the record of the life of an inspired and inspiring man.

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