

**John Moors Cabot, Oral History Interview—1/27/1971**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Cabot, Ambassador to Brazil (1959-1961) and Ambassador to Poland (1962-1965), discusses Brazil's involvement in the Alliance for Progress, U.S. foreign policy towards Poland and Eastern Europe during the John F. Kennedy Administration, and U.S.-China relations during the Kennedy Administration, among other issues.

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John Moors Cabot

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John Moors Cabot

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Oral History Interview

with

John Moors Cabot

January 27, 1971  
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Ambassador Cabot, let me begin by remarking that you were in the post of ambassador to Brazil when President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] came into office. That's correct isn't it? Could you recall for us the general reception of his election by the Brazilians, how it appeared to them and how it appeared to you in your post?

CABOT: Well, I think that the Brazilians preferred Kennedy to Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon]. I think they thought that they were going to get more out of the United States under the Kennedy administration than under the Nixon administration. You remember that President Kennedy had already announced the *Alianza para el Progreso*, and I think that looked promising. It looked more or less along the lines of what Kubitschek [Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira] referred to as the *Operação pan Americana*. And the Brazilians did need our help very much. They were just barely getting through the Kubitschek administration which expired almost simultaneously with the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration. And they certainly wanted help from us.

MOSS: All right. Now one of the things that occurred in the early Kennedy Administration was an attempt to get this *Alianza* whipped into shape, and you had several distinguished visitors coming through Brazil.

CABOT: That's correct.

MOSS: If my notes are correct, the first one was the McGovern [George S. McGovern] Food for Peace trip along with

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Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] in early February, or mid-February, of 1961. Do you recall this?

CABOT: Just vaguely. What I particularly recall is the Berle [Adolf A. Berle, Jr.] visit of February.

MOSS: Yes. We'll get to that. Let me just take the McGovern-Schlesinger one first. I note in his book that Schlesinger quotes you on the question of the problems of Latin America here on page 179. I wonder if you would read that and, first, whether or not you actually said that, and second, whether or not the sentiments reflect your opinion even if it's not an accurate quote?

CABOT: I think that's accurate, yes,

MOSS: Fine, fine.

CABOT: It certainly represents some views I held then and since.

MOSS: Right. Fine. When we have a quote like that, we like to get it from the man himself instead of getting a secondhand one. Now, you were a career man with the State Department and had had a good deal of experience in Latin America in your career. And you served as assistant secretary for Latin America at one point.

CABOT: I served as assistant secretary for a year, yes.

MOSS: Right. Now, how did this developing *Alianza* look to you as a man with some experience in the area?

CABOT: Why, I rather liked it. It seemed to me that it was the most promising initiative which we could take, and we certainly needed to take some initiative because the Latin Americans were not going to clear up their own mess. There was one aspect of it which concerned me quite a little, and that was that, obviously, what we expected the Latin Americans to do for themselves was intervention on our part. In other words, I expected Latin Americans to make these reforms. We were intervening in their internal affairs, and that, of course, is forbidden by inter-American agreements. But except for that, it seemed to me that it was the only possible.... It was the best possible approach despite that fact. Of course, the fact that it was intervention is pretty clearly indicated by the reluctance of the Latin American countries to do all that's expected of them.

MOSS: This is a very interesting problem because we run

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into it also in-the Far East with Vietnam and the intransigence of Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] to do the kind of reforms that we think are necessary. How do you react to this kind of, not Yankee imperialism, but Yankee nation-building according to our lights and this kind of thing? How do you react to that whole idea?

CABOT: Well, we never can build another nation, that's obvious. I mean you can impose communism on a country. You can't impose democracy on a country. It's got to grow.

MOSS: And yet, I seem to get the feeling that with a number of people in the Kennedy Administration, particularly of the Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] type and so on, that there is a feeling that if only we press the right buttons, things will go right for us in these developing countries.

CABOT: Well, they may be right to a certain extent, and I think they have gone right to a certain extent, but there's no button which will make everything go right. I'm quite certain of that.

MOSS: What I'm getting at, I think, is a question of whether or not the expectations were a bit too high, a bit too ambitious, a bit too quick, and whether or not this led to a kind of disillusionment with involvement in the underdeveloped world. This accusation has been made after the fact, I think.

CABOT: Yes, I think that a somewhat unfair criticism. My reasoning is that if you don't aim pretty high and don't aim to get things done quickly, why, you're going to find that nothing does get done at all, or very little gets done.

MOSS: How counterproductive is it in the view of the people living in these countries, as you said, with Americans meddling in their internal affairs? You've got the two forces here, one for progress and the other one against. How do you get around this? How did it happen in Brazil?

CABOT: Well, I don't quite get the thrust of your question.

MOSS: All right. Perhaps it was not phrased properly. I see the problem of American social engineers approaching an underdeveloped country and saying, "This is the way you really have to do it if you want to succeed," and the individuals in the country resenting this and saying: "We are ourselves. We have our own identity. Who are you to tell us

how to do things?" And yet you say that you have to aim high and aim for a quick solution if you expect anything to be done. Now I see these as opposed forces.

CABOT: They are. As I say, I don't know any way you can prevent this resentment at American interference.

MOSS: Well, what do you do in the face of it?

CABOT: Well, you try to be as tactful as possible and to as inconspicuous as possible to get your work done behind the scenes, and to camouflage it as well as you can as a cooperative effort.

MOSS: All right. Now in what ways do you get your work done behind the scenes? What are the kinds of things that you do? What are the kinds of things that you did in Brazil?

CABOT: Well, you must remember that I left Brazil just about the time of the Montevideo Conference. I think it was actually in session when I left Brazil. So, I never was responsible for pushing the Alliance for Progress.

MOSS: Right, Well, let's talk for a moment, then, about some of the other people who came through. You have the Berle trip in later February 1961. You said you remembered that fairly well. Could you describe to me the events of that trip as you remember them?

CABOT: Well, Berle came, I'm sure, to get Brazilian backing for the attack on Cuba. He wanted to be sure that Brazil wouldn't be on our necks and would be, in fact, favorable to it. And frankly, I thought he was rather tactless. You know, he had a scene with President Quadros [Jânio da Silva Quadros]. I was along with him, and he said, "Now, we're going to let you have a hundred million dollars, no strings attached, and we can consider more if you need it." Then he went on and tried to push the matter of Cuba. And Quadros said, "Nix, I'm not going to commit myself."

MOSS: Do you recall in what terms this was expressed, whether it was diplomatic pressure upon Cuba, or was there an intimation of the impending invasion, or what?

CABOT: I'm pretty sure Berle didn't mention the invasion, no, but he rather strongly intimated that something had to be done about Cuba and that we wanted Brazilian backing for it. And Quadros said they wouldn't



give it. Then Berle came back again and again mentioning a hundred million dollars, which I thought was very unnecessary. It was obvious it was just a bribe. I mean that's what it amounted to. And Quadros, with increasing irritation, said no. And they finally had to leave it on that basis. Then, when Berle left the next day from Rio, there was nobody there to see him off, which was rather a slap. I don't know if it was intended, but it looked that way.

MOSS: Now later the Secretary, Dean Rusk, characterized the talks as useful. This is a constant euphemism for all talks, I think. What was the real reaction of the State Department to this Berle-Quadros meeting? I'm sure that you, in your cables back and forth, had mentioned the thing. And what sort of reaction was there to the results of that meeting?

CABOT: Well, I don't remember any particular reaction. We, of course, reported the matter. I don't know what Berle may have said. He apparently didn't realize he put his foot in it.

MOSS: Did you inform him that he had put his foot in it?

CABOT: No.

MOSS: Why didn't you inform Berle he'd put his foot in it?

CABOT: I didn't see that any useful purpose would be served after the event by making such a disagreeable comment to a friend.

MOSS: Right. What sort of advice were you giving the State Department at this time about Brazil vis-à-vis Cuba? What sort of things were you stressing as being important? Do you recall?

CABOT: No, I don't. I'm sorry. I didn't review that part of my diary. I mean, we'd report the events, but we were under no instructions to feel out the Brazilians on the subject of Cuba. You see, that's what Berle was sent down particularly to do. So I don't think that we had any intimation from the.... In fact, I know we didn't have any intimation from the State Department of the impending Bay of Pigs affair. The only intimation I got that anything was afoot was one time coming back from Brasilia with Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] his name is, isn't it?

MOSS: Yes.

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CABOT: He said something about the possibility of an armed attack on Cuba, and I expressed considerable misgivings about it. I didn't say I thought it was definitely unwise since I didn't have any details; I didn't know what was

planned. But he did give me a hint that something was afoot. So it didn't come as a complete surprise to me when this attack occurred.

MOSS: How much of a surprise do you think it was to the Brazilians?

CABOT: Considerable. I remember Leitão da Cunha [Vasco Leitão da Cunha], who was then, as I remember, secretary general of the foreign office, calling me up after the first bombings saying, "What do you know about this?" I said, "I know absolutely nothing," which, of course, was true. I didn't know what the dickens was going on.

MOSS: Did you get involved at all in the soul-searching following the Bay of Pigs disaster?

CABOT: No, because I wasn't concerned.

MOSS: Right.

CABOT: I remember a bunch of leftist deputies in the chamber called on me to express their indignation. I told them that I thought it was perfectly terrible that an attack on a totalitarian regime which had done all the things which the Castro [Fidel Castro] regime had done should be criticized by them. Best face I could put on it.

MOSS: Right. A little later on, again in April 1961, as a matter of fact, there was an Inter-American Bank governor's meeting in Rio and Secretary Dillon [C. Douglass Dillon] was down there for it. They were essentially preparing for Punta del Este, wasn't this correct?

CABOT: I think that's right. It was at that time that Dillon recommended this enormous financial transaction with Brazil. As I remember it, it was a billion eight hundred million dollars as the total money, old and new money involved. Considerable, several hundred millions in new money. And when I got the full details, I was rather horrified and went to Dillon and said to him, "I don't think this is wise. I think we want to keep Brazil on rather a short leash." Already by that time, Jânio had been rather disagreeable to us, and got a lot more disagreeable after it which I think proved my point. Among other things, he decorated Che Guevara with the highest Brazilian decoration.

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MOSS: Yes. There was a bit of a squabble about letting Guevara's mother [Celia de la Serna] speak at one of the universities, wasn't there? I seem to recall.

CABOT: I guess there was. I'd forgotten it.

MOSS: Right. Do you recall anything else from the Dillon trip that you think is

significant?

CABOT: No. Except as I say, here was this man who had in various ways, stepped on our toes. And Dillon was proposing to—in fact, he did—give them this enormous conversion and then a lot of extra new money.

MOSS: Do you recall any counter argument from Dillon as to why this ought to be done?

CABOT: No, he just listened to me and went his own way and did it.

MOSS: Right. In June of '61 Ambassador Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] comes through.

CABOT: Yes. I wasn't there then.

MOSS: You weren't there then.

CABOT: No. I was home on leave.

MOSS: Right. Of course. You had a White House appointment, I believe.

CABOT: Yes, that's right.

MOSS: Yes, yes, that we have down there. Do you recall anything about that trip? I'm sure you were aware of its circumstances and so on.

CABOT: Yes, I do remember one thing. He had the main suite in the embassy while he was there, and our two dogs were out on the porch outside. And he was constantly annoyed by their barking.

MOSS: He had Ellis Briggs [Ellis O. Briggs] along with him who had been ambassador to Brazil. Well, let me ask, since we're in June of 1961, what you recall of that meeting with the several ambassadors at the White House?

CABOT: As I say, the only thing I recall is I have a note—I think there were five ambassadors went up there—

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and the only question I got from the President was what advice I had to give him about going to Punta del Este. As I said, my reply was, according to my diary, that I would play it by ear. And my reasoning, as I recorded it was, that I thought it depended on how anxious they were, the other republics were, that he should come, and what the prospects were of the success of the meeting.

MOSS: Do you recall advice given by the other people present?

CABOT: No, they were all asked different questions, as I recall it.

MOSS: What sort of things were talked about at the meeting? What was the general subject of the meeting?

CABOT: I don't recall. I mean, I think each would be asked something concerning his country.

MOSS: I see. So it was sort of a getting acquainted kind of thing, really?

CABOT: Yes, it was just.... President Kennedy wanted to receive the various new ambassadors, or ambassadors new and other.

MOSS: All right. In August 1961, about the time that you're leaving, Ted Kennedy [Edward Moore Kennedy] comes down through Brazil on a trip through South America. Were you there at that time?

CABOT: I was there.

MOSS: Do you remember that, and could you recall incidents from that trip?

CABOT: Well, he particularly did not wish to appear under the aegis of the embassy. He didn't want anybody to be prevented from talking freely by the fact that I was along. So that I didn't go with him very much. I think that it was probably wise in his spot because he went around to see students. Of course, the students in Brazil have always been acting a little bit like the American students have been acting in recent years. And he wanted to get their frank viewpoint. So I invited him to stay at the embassy which he didn't do.

MOSS: How did he impress you at that time as a person? How did he conduct himself?

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CABOT: I think he was very interested, and I think his ideas were, on the whole, pretty sound. He was a little young, if I may say so. He apparently got in wrong. I've forgotten how. He put his foot in it in several places, not seriously, but for some reason, he just happened to step on the wrong toes. But I think his basic approach was sound.

MOSS: All right, now you leave Brazil in August of '61, ostensibly, at least from what I read in the press accounts, because Quadros was upset with something

you had said earlier about.... You characterized Brazil, or said Brazil could not be characterized as an uncommitted nation, or something of this sort. And Quadros took exception to it.

CABOT: Yes, that's correct. What happened was I was at a press conference. The question was asked—how did it go exactly—“didn't you consider Brazil as a committed nation?” And I said, “It is a committed nation.” Of course, I was thinking of the Rio de Janeiro Treaty. Then I went on to say, of course Brazil can interpret its commitments as it chooses. And to Quadros, apparently, this was just another one of the illustrations that he was anti-American. It was a perfectly proper statement. He picked that up and made this speech about two or three days later in which he said that nobody's going to tell Brazil how it should run its affairs, though I particularly avoided doing that.

MOSS: Yes. Yes. But this did lead to your recall, did it?

CABOT: No, because already before that.... As a matter of fact, I don't think Quadros would've said it except for the fact that Stevenson had told Quadros that I was going to be recalled.

MOSS: Oh, I see.

CABOT: So Quadros knew that I was going. He knew he could take a kick at me without having any retaliation.

MOSS: And of course, Lincoln Gordon comes in as your replacement.

CABOT: That's right.

MOSS: How did you view that, or did you have anything at all to do with that?

CABOT: Well, I'd nothing to do with it. I mean, I think

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Lincoln Gordon was quite an able man.

MOSS: Right. Okay. You go back to Washington for a while and you're considered for several posts, ambassador to the OAS [Organization of American States], ambassador to Portugal, and so on. What was happening to you and what were you doing during this time?

CABOT: Well, let's see. I came home...

MOSS: Were you seeking any of these posts specifically?

CABOT: No. I came home in August. I've forgotten why. Oh yes, I was on a selection board, that's it.

MOSS: Right. Right.

CABOT: I was on a selection board from about the first of September to about the first of November. Then my mother-in-law had died, and so Elizabeth [Elizabeth Cabot] and I went down to Mexico to straighten out her affairs. While I was there, I was called by telephone to ask whether I'd take Venezuela or Poland. Those were the two. And Elizabeth preferred to go to Poland rather than Venezuela. She thought that there were so many things happening that I'd get into complications although I favored the Alliance for Progress. But seeing how I suspected that the Kennedy Administration thought that I was a reactionary Republican....

MOSS: Had you given them any excuse for this?

CABOT: No, I hadn't. On the contrary, I have always been very careful to keep out of politics and to do what I was told. Except, well, I must say on occasion I have very strongly opposed things that the Department...

MOSS: What sort of things? Let me see if I can get a particular...

CABOT: Well, I was thinking particularly of the case in Argentina. I was down under Spruille Braden. It looked as though Peron [Juan Peron] was a dictator with very little popular support. And so Braden, who had been sent down to wipe out the German influences in Argentina, proceeded to get mad at Peron and eventually attacked him very, very publicly, very, very strongly. But he could do it because he knew he was leaving. Then I was left as chargé for about eight months. It was a perfectly terrible time because, of course, every sort of thing was happening, and I didn't have the power of an ambassador. So I was supposed to

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do a lot of things. I did do quite a few things. Well, then it became increasingly obvious that Peron did have a good deal of mass support, that although all the old line parties were against him, that he, nevertheless, stirred up quite a lot of popular support. Whereas under instructions I did, for example, publish the telegrams which had been found in the German archives showing the numerous Peronista papers which had been receiving German financial assistance, by the time the Blue Book was due, I objected to it. I mean, I didn't think it was wise. But whether, or what influence the Blue Book had on the election, I don't know, but the election was reasonably fair. Peron won overwhelmingly.

Well, from that moment on, I felt that we simply had to make the best of a bad situation and accept Peron as the leader of the Argentine people. Well, Braden, of course, was not willing to do that, and so I thought that one over at considerable length and finally came to the conclusion that the only thing left for me to do was to oppose it very strongly, to

the point of getting thrown out if need be, which I did. But what I didn't know was that much more prestigious people in Washington had reached the same conclusions that I'd reached, and that they had gone to Byrnes [John Byrnes], that is Senators Vandenberg [Arthur Hendrick Vandenberg] and Connally [Thomas Terry Connally] had gone to Byrnes and said, "You've simply got to reverse your policy of intervention on Argentine internal affairs." And Byrnes said, "Very well." And so then they sent George Messersmith [George Strausser Messersmith] down as ambassador. Now, there was one case where I did very strongly oppose what the State Department was trying to do, but within channels.

MOSS: Right. Now, what sort of intimation did you have from the State Department or from the Kennedy people that they, perhaps, viewed you with some suspicion as being a conservative or a reactionary? What kind of signals were you getting?

CABOT: I wasn't getting any signals. It's just my impression, that's all.

MOSS: I see. Usually impressions are based on something specific that you can identify, a word or an attitude or a coldness where you expect warmth or something of this sort.

CABOT: Well, I think that Dillon gave me the impression that he didn't agree with me. And in the matter I mentioned about this financial transaction.... It was obvious that when Berle and Goodwin and—let's see, who else was it?—came down, they all gave the impression that they had their own ideas about Brazil and weren't

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particularly interested in mine. I must say, it came as somewhat of a surprise to me that I was taken out until I knew that I was going to be at the end of May. Oh, that's something which I should mention another instance of, the fact that it was not this incident which caused my recall, but rather my recall which caused this incident. In May I heard that I was going to be.... This was late in May, just about the time that this.... It was a month later that I went down to President Kennedy. In May I heard that I was going to be recalled and was told that I'd get the OAS, which was perfectly satisfactory to me.

MOSS: Why did the OAS thing fall through?

CABOT: Because they gave it to Morrison [de Lesseps S. Morrison].

MOSS: Right.

CABOT: In other words, it was a political decision.

MOSS: Okay. Now you are appointed ambassador to Poland in January of 1962, or at

least you're confirmed by the Senate at the end of January. And I note that there's a February appointment with the President prior to your leaving for Poland. Do you recall that meeting, and did you have any particular instructions upon your departure? I understand that you carried a letter to the head of the Polish State Council from President Kennedy.

CABOT: Well, I had my letter of credence. I didn't have anything besides that.

MOSS: You didn't have anything besides that. Then the newspaper reports were wrong. They had credited you with a special letter.

CABOT: Yes, I think so; I don't recall any letter.

MOSS: Do you recall anything about this particular meeting? Were you given any special instructions?

CABOT: Yes, that was the time when I really made a boner. The President asked me various things about Brazil which I told him. Then I mentioned this horrible disease schistosomiasis which is...

MOSS: Is it from the snails?

CABOT: Yes, the snails. And he said, well now, wasn't

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anything being done about it? And I said, "I don't know." Well, as a matter of fact, I did know as I later recalled because when I'd been up in Bahia about two years earlier I had met two Americans who were working there at the University of Bahia, a Brazilian college, to try and do something about this. I don't know whether they ever succeeded, but they were working on it. And it made me look rather foolish to the President not to know about that.

MOSS: Did he ever catch you on it later?

CABOT: No, he never did. He was perfectly nice about it. It was rather stupid on my part.

MOSS: Do you recall anything else from that meeting?

CABOT: No. I think there was some mention made of the fact that his two sisters were going out to Poland. And I asked the President whether he wanted me to go earlier than I had planned to go because, see, I had my consultations which I had to do after the confirmation. And he said, no, it wasn't necessary.



MOSS: Who was briefing you on Poland? What sort of briefing did you get and what were the kinds of instructions that you were receiving about what was to take place?

CABOT: It was mostly a question of reading up the files and sort of going around and meeting the various people I'd be dealing with in the department.

MOSS: You have the whole question beginning to open up about an approach to Eastern Europe, trying to open up Eastern Europe to American overtures and so on. How much of this was in your preparation? How much of it was evident at that time?

CABOT: My recollection is that there was no evidence at that time of that sort of thing, that came later, particularly under Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. They had a talk about—what was it—something about trade with Eastern Europe. I don't refer to the meeting in '63 when I came home and was thoroughly mad because the State Department had very much increased an agricultural loan which the United States was making to Poland. You recall that for about seven years or so, eight years, I've forgotten exactly how many, the United States had been making these sales of agricultural surpluses to Poland. And they were quite large. The next to last was about sixty million dollars. Now, I had recommended cutting

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down on that, and when they just came right ahead without even consulting me about it, about increasing the size, why, I was furious and sent a personal message to Rusk saying that I thought this was unwise. In the first place they were going to load Poland with so much debt that they couldn't pay it. In the second place, Poland might default on the debt just out of pure cussedness, though they had a good record for paying their debts. And in the third place, I didn't see why we should be so particularly friendly to Poland when they weren't being particularly friendly to us. Oh, then I got letters from the department indicating that orders for this came from a very high source. So when I saw the President on June 11, 1963—I have a fairly extensive record of this in my diary—I asked him whether... [Interruption] I asked him whether it was true that he wanted these large sales made. And of course, if he wanted it done, why, it was his decision, and I, obviously, was going to accept it. But I wanted him to appreciate the arguments against it. So I argued against large sales. I remember when the President said, "I always thought it was a poor idea. Of course, they're never going to pay us." And so I said—suddenly reversing my field completely—and said, "Mr. President, we don't want to cut it out all together. We just want to cut it down so as not to give them such extra leverage." And he didn't comment on that. There: "To the White House to see the President. We had a cheerful fifteen minutes conversation. He wanted to know what the Poles were up to in Laos and why, which I explained as well as I could."\* That was the question of the ICC [International Control Commission].

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\* Ambassador Cabot is quoting from his personal diary at this point.

MOSS: ICC. Yes, what was your advice to him on that? Do you recall?

CABOT: Well, I didn't give him any particular advice.

MOSS: Or the explanation?

CABOT: The fact was that the Pole there was just a communist agent. That's all. And he was busily sabotaging every effort to have the ICC work.

MOSS: All right. We're on a sidetrack here for a moment, but we have in late 1961 and early 1962 the beginnings of an increase in the military assistance group in Vietnam. The numerical quantity of our forces in

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Vietnam was beginning to go up, and the State Department was very worried about the contravention of the Geneva Accords, how we were going to put a good face on this to the rest of the world, particularly to the ICC, particularly to our friends who were members of the ICC, the Indians and the Canadians. Did you get any instruction as to how to put this over to the Poles, or was it simply left out of your domain entirely?

CABOT: Well, that was left out of my domain. It was rigorously explained to the Poles. They were busy trying to say that the Pole was behaving properly.

MOSS: That Ho Chi Minh was behaving properly.

CABOT: No, not that Ho Chi Minh was. I don't recall particular conversations with the Poles about any of that. But I was going to say...

MOSS: Yes, go ahead. This is about your diary again.

CABOT: I then asked him about PL-480 explaining my thoughts. My thought: We shouldn't give them too much. And to my astonishment, he said he wondered if we should give them any. He added that he didn't expect they'd ever repay us the dollars that they were supposed to. I hastily reversed my field, and pointed out we stood to lose a good deal if we cut them off completely. Anyhow: "He's obviously sore at the Poles about Laos, and obviously isn't the mysterious influence pressing for bigger PL-480 hand-outs in that argument." That's my diary notation.

MOSS: You seem to have a fairly extensive diary and so on on your.... Did you keep this throughout your career?

CABOT: No. I kept it from '47 until I retired.

MOSS: One of the things that the library does is to seek out people who have diaries of their public lives in the mid-twentieth century and covering the life and times of President Kennedy, and we ask you to consider eventual deposit of these in the library under whatever restrictions you would like to put on them. I'll make this pitch to you right now. We'll follow it up sometime later with a letter, I think.

CABOT: Well, I have pretty extensive diaries for twenty years of service. I must say, though, my will directs that they be offered to Harvard and then if Harvard doesn't want them to whatever other institution they

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they may choose. I think I may have mentioned Tufts.

MOSS: Yes. Well, since we are going to be located at Harvard, at Cambridge, and will, I hope, be the focal point there for political research and so on of the mid-twentieth century, I hope that if you give them to Harvard, you'll say "How about putting them over there in the Kennedy Library?"

CABOT: There's not much about Kennedy in these diaries. That's an awfully extensive thing to...

MOSS: That's not quite the point. We're documenting Kennedy, yes. But we're trying to go beyond that and to show the times in which he operated, the background against which he operated. And of course, he went into the House of Representatives in '46, began his political life there about the time that, what, you were in Shanghai, weren't you at that time?

CABOT: I was in Shanghai in '48.

MOSS: Forty-seven, forty-eight.

CABOT: No, '48-'49. I was in Yugoslavia in '47.

MOSS: Okay. Well it brings us around, speaking of Shanghai, to the fact that in your appointment as ambassador to Poland, you were the American counterpart to Wang Ping-nan, who was there as the Chinese Communist ambassador, and you had talks with him. What sort of things were you discussing, or is that not for publication at this time?

CABOT: Well, it's not for publication at this time. We have an agreement with the Chinese Communists that we won't publish things. I have held several off-the-record discussions of them, but it's supposed to be strictly off-the-record.

MOSS: Let me ask one or two things about it then. You say it's strictly off-the-record.

Does the State Department, however, have a fairly complete record of the talks?

CABOT: They ought to. I certainly handed them in long enough. I used to type verbatim reports of what we said.

MOSS: This is one of the things we try to do, to point out where scholars might go in the future for specific

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pieces of information. Let me ask you if without a breach of the confidence of these talks, you could characterize the talks in any way and characterize Ambassador Wang. What kind of a fellow is he? How did you talk to him? What was the atmosphere of these meetings?

CABOT: Sheer vituperation.

MOSS: As simple as that?

CABOT: Well, actually I suppose a certain amount was accomplished. One time particularly, which wasn't one of the regular talks, there was a crisis building up in the Formosa Straits. There was a build-up in '62, built on both sides of the Straits.

MOSS: Yes. I was in the intelligence community at that time, and I was watching the Fukien coasts very closely.

CABOT: But anyhow, finally Wang asked me to come around for a private meeting which, having already been told I might, I accepted. And the State Department acted with remarkable celerity. Within forty-eight hours I had my full instructions as to what I was to say. And that was just before the meeting took place. Wang had me in and said, "Now, the Nationalists are building up their military forces on their side of the Straits, and don't you help them invade China or you'll regret it." I said—under instructions—"We have no intentions of helping the Nationalists invade China. And you'll recall that the Nationalists have agreed not to invade without our permission, which we've not given. But don't you invade Formosa, or you'll regret it." That was about what the conversation amounted to. At that point, the crisis evaporated. By the time that each side knew that the other wasn't planning, themselves, to start something, why the crisis, as I say, evaporated.

MOSS: Yes, I remember we were very worried about the thing. We had units moving all the way from Manchuria down to the Fukien area in this terrific build-up and we couldn't understand quite why. There were people who had hunches,

you know, that this was 'it.' The Chinese Communists were really going to go after the off-shore islands or Formosa. You were in Shanghai in the time when the Communists took over. And in subsequent years there has been a lot of soul-searching on that whole China experience, the white paper, Pat Hurley's [Patrick J. Hurley] comments, the blows that the State Department career people suffered afterwards, the reign of Robertson [Walter S. Robertson] as Assistant Secretary for Far East.

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How do you see the development of that? And how do you see the Kennedy Administration responding to China?

CABOT: Well, I don't recall anything, any of President Kennedy's reactions to China. I was, of course, not at all concerned in the three years he was president, with Chinese affairs. I don't recall anything,

MOSS: You get any intimation of how the State Department was viewing China through your activity as the spokesman in Warsaw?

CABOT: Oh, I beg your pardon, that's so stupid on my part. Well, of course, we did get a fairly clear reaction, yes. That bit of incident I described at this private meeting with Wang is not confidential. The whole thing's been published as one of the numerous instances of breaches of confidence, and incidentally, both sides were guilty of it on that occasion. What made me mad was that the next meeting I was instructed to complain to the Chinese about their breach. Of course, the *New York Times* published the whole story on the front page the day after our talk. So I said, "I think we had better lay off that if you don't mind." I recall that they allowed me to.

MOSS: I wonder, you've got, in the latter portion of the Kennedy administration, at least, a moving away from the sacrosanctity of the Chiang [Chiang Kai-shek] regime on Taiwan, looking towards the possibility of what is called the "two Chinas" policy and so on. What kind of intimations were you getting of this?

CABOT: None at all. I was always instructed to point out we had an alliance with Taiwan and that we were going to honor it.

MOSS: Let me ask you since your career spans this whole forties, fifties, sixties era, whether the popularized characterizations of the setback to State Department old China hands hurt our Far Eastern diplomacy at all, or whether it was a sound development? The popular characterization is that the Hurley-Robertson thing really was pretty tough on our ability to handle Far Eastern situations, that it was a one-sided, narrow view and that what we need is a broadening understanding that perhaps comes later with a Harriman [William Averell Harriman] or a Hilsman [Roger Hilsman]. What's your view of this?

CABOT: Well, I must say that my principal view is that it is perfectly outrageous the way those old China hands

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were treated. I mean, I felt very strongly about it. In fact, I tried to get the American Foreign Service Association to sue Secretary Dulles [John Foster Dulles] in regard to the John Paton Davies [John Paton Davies, Jr.] case because I thought that was a clear-cut case of injustice. That was my number one feeling. Personally, I don't believe that the China policy business was much hurt—I mean from a policy viewpoint—by what happened to these old China hands. The fact that they were so accustomed to the old China that they didn't understand what had hit. And I don't think that they would've reacted very wisely in consequence.

MOSS: And where do you see a new understanding beginning to arise about China and what to do about it?

CABOT: I think that people like Marshall Green probably understand pretty well what's going on. He, of course, hasn't ever served in China.

MOSS: Let me go back to Poland a moment with you. I understand that in the development of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 in the Congress, there was the Kitchin [A. Paul Kitchin] Amendment brought up in the House of Representatives. It was to get rid of the most favored nation treaty for both Yugoslavia and Poland, and you had some objection to this that carried some weight.

CABOT: Yes. I was practically poised to come back and argue the thing before a committee of Congress. My point was that, what earthly good would it do, as it would mean that the Poles would repudiate their debts to us. And I didn't see any point to it, I mean, just throwing five hundred million dollars out the window, just like that. I suppose that five hundred million these days isn't very much, but still to me it was a consideration. And what good would it do? I mean, why not have MFN [most favored nation] for Poland?

MOSS: And was there any objection to your position in the State Department or in your embassy?

CABOT: Oh, no. No.

MOSS: Or it was simply the question of selling it to certain people in Congress?

CABOT: Yeah.

MOSS: Right. Okay, now there's a question of a growing relationship between the East European countries,

particularly Poland, and Western Germany, the question of a rapprochement there with Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer] and so on.

CABOT: Yes.

MOSS: What do you recall of this and its development during your tenure as ambassador?

CABOT: Well, during the period I was in Poland, the Poles were constantly beating propaganda drums against West Germany. And Adenauer, of course, was sticking to the German claims to East Germany or western Poland, whatever you want to call it. So there wasn't any progress. That's all come since Willy Brandt became chancellor.

MOSS: Well, you had the Rapacki Plan [Adam Rapacki] for...

CABOT: Yes.

MOSS: And what was your function with respect to evaluating that kind of thing?

CABOT: Well actually, what happened while I was there was that we reiterated our objections to the Rapacki Plan, and—I forget—it was done in some extremely discourteous way so that I got some fallout from that, but that was just simply.... All I could do there was to report the fallout because the action had already been taken without even consulting me.

MOSS: I have a note that on October 15th—I believe it was 1962, it may've been '63—the President, in Buffalo, New York made a speech in which he asserted that Poland was not lost forever to the Soviet Bloc. Do these kinds of statements give ambassadors problems?

CABOT: They do indeed.

MOSS: Do you recall this particular one?

CABOT: I do recall that. There was considerable annoyance in Poland about that.

MOSS: Yes, I can imagine. Do you recall the specific circumstances and what was said to you and what you said back?

CABOT: I don't really.... I don't know if I have anything in my diaries, but I couldn't find it without some...

MOSS: Some searching.

CABOT: Yes. You know, I think that the matter was never discussed between me and Polish officials. I think that what happened was that the Polish newspapers all blew their tops so that you knew perfectly well what was going on. It had annoyed them.

MOSS: Were you still in Poland when Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] came through later in about 1964, I guess?

CABOT: I certainly was.

MOSS: Could you describe that? I understand he tied the embassy in knots practically, running around trying to keep up with him and going out of bounds and all the rest of it. I recall his standing on top of a car and singing “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” and all sorts of things.

CABOT: I forget whether he sang “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.” Well, frankly, I was very annoyed about the whole business. It had its good points. Kennedy was followed by huge crowds wherever he went, but he got the Polish government practically livid with some of the things he did. And he got the embassy so mad that it could scarcely splutter.

MOSS: Well, when you could scarcely splutter at him, what was his reaction to...

CABOT: Oh, we didn't splutter with him.

MOSS: Oh, I see. This is all in private.

CABOT: I was reasonably polite to him. All sorts of things had happened.

MOSS: What things do you recall?

CABOT: Well, for example...

MOSS: Anecdotes.

CABOT: ...the first day that he arrived he said he wanted to go to an orphanage and distribute some books. That is it—*Happy as a Warm Puppy*—isn't that the name?

MOSS: *Happiness Is a Warm Puppy*, the Schulz [Charles M. Schulz] Peanuts thing,



yes.

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CABOT: And so we made arrangements to go to this orphanage. And we arrived in the middle of this violent rain storm, I remember, one of these summer showers. And there were no children there. Well, needless to say, the Kennedys were thoroughly annoyed. We later discovered that what happened was that the superintendent who'd given us the appointment had found out that the Polish government didn't like us to give them things, and so the Polish superintendent's reaction was to take all the children out, not telling us anything about it. Well, Kennedy was terribly sore. That night there was a dinner given by the Minister of Justice out at Jablonna and Kennedy proceeded to lecture the whole dinner long to the Foreign Minister on the subject of this orphanage affair. Rapacki said later, "My, it sounds as if we took them all to Siberia." Then Mrs. Ethel Kennedy [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] didn't come to the dinner. She said she was sick. But then it was later discovered that she'd been out on the town with newspaper correspondents. And of course, everyone in Warsaw knows about that sort of thing. So that was one of the items which annoyed the Poles. Oh, there was a whole series of other things. Speaking about standing at the top of my car, the result was the top collapsed. We had an awful time fixing it.

MOSS: I have often wondered about that because I once stood on the top of a car myself and we couldn't get it repaired properly. It was never right again. I wondered what had happened. I mean, he was a smallish fellow, but he still had enough weight, I'm sure, to dent the thing very badly.

CABOT: Really, there were about six of them on top of the car. The results were disastrous. Well, then I gave a dinner, and we had quite a distinguished group including the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Foreign Trade and the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and, oh, various other prominent Poles. Bobby Kennedy had gone to Krakow that day, and he got back—since I had somebody down there to inform me when he was going to get back—he got back at seven. The dinner was at eight. He arrived outside the door at nine, and as I said, there were crowds awaiting his arrival. And so he proceeded to deliver a ten minute harangue to the crowd with one of my secretaries translating. By the time he got into that little patio we had, where we were having our cocktails, the Poles were fit to be tied. The combination of being an hour late when there was no necessity for it and spending ten minutes haranguing a crowd while they were waiting for him really was more than they could stand. So the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs gets up and says, "Now, Mr. Kennedy, you've addressed the crowd outside. Why don't you get on this table and address us?"

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MOSS: Do you remember the substance of this harangue at all?

CABOT: Oh, I've really forgotten. No. I didn't hear it.

MOSS: Oh, you didn't hear it.

CABOT: No, because I was inside you see. Then Kennedy get his own back, though, later in the day. I've thought of it in the light of recent events. The Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs was criticizing Kennedy for getting up on top of cars and haranguing crowds and things like that. And he said, "Gonulka [Wladyslaw Gomulka] would never have done a thing like that." Whereupon Kennedy said, "Well, maybe that's what's wrong with Gomulka."

MOSS: Oh, for heaven's sake. Now Gomulka, poor chap, is out of Poland and accused of being too liberal, I believe, if I read the papers right.

CABOT: I didn't see that and I thought I followed it very carefully.

MOSS: Well, no. It was my impression—and this is an aside—that he was accused of letting things drift too much so that the people were getting restless and that sort of thing. Perhaps I read it wrong.

CABOT: The thing that I gathered that he was accused of not being sufficiently in touch with popular opinion.

MOSS: Perhaps. Perhaps that's the way it goes.

CABOT: Oh, I must tell you one other little thing which I think is a delightful episode. It's a little wide of the mark. The day after Kennedy left, it was the fourth of July. And we had our usual reception, the only thing that many of the Polish officials ever come to. And we thought that in view of the impression which Kennedy'd made in Polish officialdom that nobody would turn up. Well, actually, they all did turn up. We couldn't figure it out until sometime later when it dawned on us. We discovered that the embassy building, the chancellery, was terribly bugged. And of course, they'd heard all the conversations about Kennedys all the while they'd talked. I suppose that they decided they'd come to express their sympathies about what we'd gone through.

MOSS: So all your complaints about the visit had gone right over to the Polish security people. Let me go

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back a minute to the John Kennedy administration. There wasn't a great deal happening in the last year with respect to Poland in 1963. Do you recall anything from that period that you would cite as being significant, a departure in policy or anything of this sort?

CABOT: No. That was where the beginning of the departure came from, the PL-480 business. I've really forgotten the exact dates of all those agreements, about

two or three were signed when I was there.

MOSS: Well, they're all on the record, so it's not important.

CABOT: But anyway, the next agreement, as a result of my objections in one thing and another, we gave them twenty million dollars. As I recall, we gave them twenty million dollars PL-480, straight PL-480, and twenty million dollars was to be done on a short term basis, and twenty million is to be paid for immediately so that it was a very much less favorable agreement. The Poles...

MOSS: Excuse me. [Interruption]

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1; BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

MOSS: All right, is there any more you wanted to say on the departures on the PL-480?

CABOT: No. About that year Congress passed a repeal of the MFN provision. Now wait a minute, that was when President Kennedy was still alive.

MOSS: Yeah, well, that was the previous summer in '62.

CABOT: In '62, as I recall it, Congress passed a law forbidding MFN to Poland and Yugoslavia.

MOSS: In '62, the Kitchin Amendment attempted to, but the House-Senate Conference knocked out that amendment, and the Trade Expansion Act went forward with the MFN provision still intact.

CABOT: Oh is that it?

MOSS: Yes.

CABOT: Anyway, the Congress did repeal that amendment at one time. And then at the same time, they passed a law...

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MOSS: Oh, I'm sorry, I have my facts wrong, The Kitchin Amendment did stand in the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, but it was never acted upon by the President.

CABOT: That's correct.

MOSS: And in 1963, it was repealed.

CABOT: Yes.

MOSS: Right. That's correct.

CABOT: And then—I guess it was in '64—Congress passed a law by which you couldn't give the PL-480 to Poland. I forget whether it was directly aimed at Poland or whether it was at all Communist countries. But they had a provision by which you could sell them on pretty favorable credit terms. Well, the Poles never wanted to take that up. I don't know why. It was more favorable than they could buy wheat in France or Canada, but they never took it up. Two or three times I suggested they really better look into it, but they didn't bite.

MOSS: Right. Now you have in the people who have written about the Kennedy Administration, particularly Schlesinger and Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and so on, an idea that there was a developing detente between the United States and the Soviet Union following the Cuban Missile Crisis in the fall of 1962. From your vantage point in Warsaw, and your prospective as a career foreign service officer over these many years, what validity do you give to that observation that there was a détente developing?

CABOT: With the Soviet Union?

MOSS: Yes.

CABOT: Well, I didn't observe anything of that nature. As I say, my impression was that there was pretty unyielding hostility on the part of the Poles toward the United States. Of course, it became more acute after Vietnam let up.

MOSS: All right, let me ask you in closing this, I guess, what the reaction was in Warsaw to the death of President Kennedy. Do you recall that?

CABOT: Oh, it was very strong. It was really very impressive. We put up a portrait of the President with a black border and then opened the books for signatures,

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and the lobby was crowded for days, despite the fact that the Polish government obviously didn't like it, No, I won't say that the Polish government obviously didn't like it. I think that's too strong a statement because some of them did come to express their condolences and sign the books, but at the same time, for Poles to go to the American embassy is always a slightly delicate matter.

MOSS: Yes, yes. What official responses did you have? You say some condolences. What was the.... Did you have any of the Polish officials sort of coming to you

and saying, “Well, what now? What’s going to happen? Is this going to make any real difference?”

CABOT: Yes, as I recall it, I was told to give assurances that the Kennedy policies would be followed.

MOSS: And it was just a simple formality.

CABOT: Yes, Cyrankiewicz [Josef Cyrankiewicz] came around to the embassy to express his condolences, and he signed the book.

MOSS: Okay, fine. That just about exhausts my store of questions. Is there anything else you think that should be added to the record? Anything that you can recall?

CABOT: I don’t know. I thought that you just wanted any direct interviews between President Kennedy and me, but you’ve covered a lot of ground.

MOSS: Well, we try to cover as much as we can. Let me cut this off now.  
[Interruption]

CABOT: Two or three things that.... I had a talk with Senator Kennedy before he was president, of course, and he received me. I always do go around and see my senators, or the Massachusetts senators, when I come back on leave. And I think this must have been about ‘54 or ‘55. And he received me very cordially. And then he proceeded to discuss aid to Yugoslavia. And he said, “Do you think it’s a good idea?” And I said, “Yes, I do on the whole. I’m in favor of it.” I think it must’ve been before the Khrushchev–Tito [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev; Marshal Tito] reconciliation. I think it must have been in that period; it may have been after though. And then Senator Kennedy said to me, “Well, I think it’s probably a good idea too. There’s a great deal of opposition to it.” I suppose on account of the Stepinac [Alojzije Stepniac] affair. But it was rather interesting, I thought, that he had the courage to stand up to the Catholics in

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Massachusetts who are, after all, awfully powerful, and take that stand. No, I had a great respect for President Kennedy. I think he was a remarkable man.

MOSS: One of the things you said just a moment ago clicked something else in my mind too. You went into Poland, what, after the Scarbeck [Irvin C. Scarbeck] thing broke, didn’t you?

CABOT: Yes.

MOSS: And then there were a couple of military attachés who were kicked out while

you were there, I believe.

CABOT: Several. It was sort of a revolving door.

MOSS: Was this pretty much an accepted thing or did any of these things cause you any particular grief that...

CABOT: Well, I always was a little annoyed when the military attachés got themselves into such obvious hot water. I mean the Poles were right. The military attachés were spying. There's no doubting it.

MOSS: Okay, I just wanted to cover that one thing. That was one thing that was in the press that I didn't cover. Fine, is there anything else?

CABOT: No, except I want to reiterate my great respect for President Kennedy. I think he was a very remarkable man. His loss was very sad for me.

MOSS: Fine, thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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