

Robert W. Komer Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 07/16/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Komer was a senior staff member of the National Security Council from 1961 through 1965. In this interview Komer discusses John F. Kennedy's [JFK] personal diplomacy with the United Arab Republic [UAR] through letters; normalizing U.S.-Egypt relations; the Yemen conflict and U.S. interests; negotiating Yemen with M. Harold Macmillan and the attempt to have the United Kingdom recognize the Yemen Republic; dealing with Gamal Abdel Nasser; and difficulties with Saudi Arabia and the UAR, among other issues.

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Robert W. Komer

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Robert W. Komer – JFK #2
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Second Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT KOMER

July 16, 1964

by Elizabeth Farmer

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TRYING TO DO BUSINESS WITH NASSER

Today I thought I would take up Kennedy's role in policy toward the U.A.R. in 1962, and policy toward the U.A.R. and the Yemen crisis, one of his favorite minor league exercises. So I have checked up on the background. You will remember that I was making two points last time. JFK was really heavily engaged in Middle East policy. He sort of functioned as his own Secretary of State. Second, he was particularly interested in changing the tone of our policy toward the so-called less developed neutralist countries and particularly the major actors on the scene--the Sukarnos, Nehrus, Nassers, etc. To illustrate the extent of personal diplomacy involved, I have had a check made of the number of letters and messages he sent to them. Let's take [Gamal Abdel] Nasser. In 1961 and 1962 there were six messages to Nasser. In 1963 there were nine. So this was really quite a substantial number. Now they were largely engaged in 1963 with Yemen policy, which we will get to. Up to fifteen letters and fifteen replies. That's a lot of mail for a busy President with one foreign leader. Since the President was dealing with some 120 different countries, some of them pretty big ones, this just shows he took an immense interest.

He had quite an extensive correspondence with Faisal [Ibn Abdul-Aziz al Sa'ud] as well, beginning with the Yemen affair when we had a real problem of calming Faisal down. Here the President's personal role in doing so was terribly important because Faisal was constantly saying, "I'm disillusioned with the State Department, and the only man whom I really trust is the President," etc. The President was perfectly willing to permit himself to be used, although, in contrast to his correspondence with Nasser, he got pretty bored with his correspondence with Faisal. He used to leave that to us. One reason why he got bored was that Faisal was one of those conservative Arabs of the old puritanical Wahabi sect from which the Saudi regime sprang. In this backward corner of the world, the importance of a letter is measured by its length and number of adjectives as well as whatever content it has. The President always used to wonder why these letters had to be so long, and I explained to him three or four times after I had learned from the experts-- [Parker T.] Pete Hart, our ambassador, gave us a good fill-in on this. Once the President had it in his mind (which he caught on to very quickly) that this was the way you did business down in the Arab peninsula, he never really minded these extremely long-winded letters with big windups and complimentary endings lasting a paragraph or two. But at the same time he got tired of reading them, so by the time we got around to the fourth or fifth letter, he would simply say to me, "What's it all about?" I would tell him in two or three sentences, and then he would say, "Well, I don't have to read the thing," and sign it. That's the way we would do business. The Nasser stuff he looked at much more closely than he did the other stuff.

I don't know whether the President himself had any particular interest in the U.A.R. or whether he had any strong views at the time of Suez, when he was a Senator, of course. But very early in the New Frontier, Bundy and [Walt W.] Rostow put up to him a set of the foreign policy problems the New Frontier ought to tackle; one of them was the question of reappraising our relations with Nasser and seeing whether we couldn't get back on a better footing with the key actor of the Arab world (as I recall, there was another on taking a new

look at our relations with [Achmed] Sukarno and a few other things like that). The President latched right on to this. He approved the list of planning projects, and this was really what began an informal, but nonetheless distinct, process in which we sought to gradually achieve a new and more successful relationship with Nasser, which was not founded on any illusions on our part that these new leaders were especially couth characters, simply that they were important people--and that we had made the mistake in the period of Dulles foreign policy of a rather black and white approach to all these guys, that if they weren't with us, they were against us. Eisenhower, once John Foster Dulles left the scene, himself began to modify his approach toward neutralists. In effect, this was Kennedy picking up and moving ahead at a much faster pace with a process of reappraisal of our U.A.R. relations which had begun really in 1959-1960, though it hadn't been carried very far.

One of the things that got the Nasser exercise off to a slow start was that the Congo business came up then. Our relations with Nasser in that early period up until about August 1961 were really a period of feeling-out that was dominated by the differences in U.S. and U.A.R. policy over the Congo. Nasser, in effect, was joining Khrushchev, though they had quite different reasons, in attempting to promote the Lumumbist solution in the Congo as opposed to the one we were interested in. But this did get out of the way fairly quickly though. As I recall, and I'm not very strong on African policy, this Russian-U.A.R. effort sort of fizzled out.

FARMER: The questions became quite different once [Patrice] Lumumba was gone.

KOMER: So the normalization process, if you want to call it that, got off to a slow start because of the Congo thing, though this began to fade as the

Egyptian role in the Congo began to fade. The first JFK letter to Nasser was a reply to one from Nasser on the Congo where he was asking the U.N. to look at the matter. Then we began to get into a situation where a number of things began to crystallize, the natural fears of the Arabs over any new Administration and particularly a Democratic one--traditionally Democratic administrations were more favorable to the Israelis than the Republicans were. This began because it happened to be Harry Truman who was in office when the Palestine war occurred and we supported Israel. So on top of the natural uncertainty of any foreign country as to what the new Administration was going to look like--especially since the new Administration had deliberately presented itself as a major new departure, etc.--there were a number of things in the U.N. where we supported Israel (our U.N. resolution on Jerusalem), and opposed the perennial Arab property custodian proposal, etc.

These things sort of accumulated and gave the State people the feeling that maybe we had better undertake some sort of new initiative toward the Arabs to convince them that the new Administration, the New Frontier, was really anxious to get off on the right foot with them. This led to the proposal that the President send a message to all the Arab chiefs of state, which, as I recall, he did on the 11th of May, saying, "Look, we intend to pursue a reasonably balanced policy in the area. We want to work with the Middle East countries so they control their own destinies." In other words, an overture saying, let's try and get along with each other and try to work out some kind of a solution to the Arab-Israeli problem. It was a very friendly letter, deliberately designed as such. Well, this sort of germinated for awhile. Some of the Arab leaders sent back almost immediately fairly cold replies, no give on the Israeli matter.

But Nasser waited for a while, and then he came back on the 22nd of August. In a letter which was quite friendly--"I've tried to open my heart to you," etc--he laid out the Arab case. There wasn't a great deal of give. He did make some cracks about "I would hope you could take a look at this problem not colored by partisan politics;" i.e., not colored

by the Jewish vote in the United States. But the tone of the letter was extremely friendly, and it gave us the opening we wanted to try and establish a personal Kennedy-Nasser relationship. The President himself, as I recall, was anxious to use this technique of personal diplomacy. Of course he had already begun to use this in other areas. Particularly, where you have charismatic leaders like Nasser or [Jawaharlal] Nehru, who are so much the one fellow who runs policy (particularly foreign policy) in a given country, it's terribly important to be able to deal with him on a person-to-person basis. As I think I said last time, the art of Presidential correspondence and face-to-face meetings was developed more under the New Frontier than in any previous time. The Egyptian ambassador [Mostafa] Kamel here was also quite strong on the importance of this. Since he had invested a great deal in better U.S.-U.A.R. relations, he was constantly urging that if we wanted to do business, do it on the Presidential level. This is the way business gets done in the Arab world. This was the point.

About that time the President approved a new PL 480 agreement for some sixty million dollars, so that moved things along. Another thing that moved the Nasser enterprise along was when the Soviets resumed testing right at the time of the Belgrade neutralist conference, and Nasser denounced it. A lot of other people didn't, and the President was very sore, particularly at [Josip Broz] Tito's equivocal attitude. But the fact that Nasser had come out and denounced sort of gave us another okay there. Then when the Syrian secession took place in October, the President did Nasser the courtesy--as I recall, this was at his own initiative--of explaining our stand. He said, "Look, I'm going to have to tell this guy we're going to have to recognize the new government because it is the government that's in power, but let's explain our policy." So we sent a message to our ambassador saying, "Tell Nasser why we're doing it." The simple courtesy of doing so made us some money. It helped to remove a degree of suspicion. By the way, when the President later approved the deal in 1962 giving a battalion of Hawks to Israel, he specified we were to notify Nasser in advance--though only slightly in advance--explaining to him the reason. That didn't make Nasser like the deal any better, but it had distinct impact on the fact that the Egyptian reaction was very moderate, all things

considered. These are the little niceties of personal diplomacy that make a hell of a difference when you're dealing with people with whom it's practically as important how you do things as what you do.

After things had begun to get better, we got to the point where we wanted to organize an action program to get some meat into our U.A.R. policy. The President got out an NSAM in September in which he said, "After the Syrian secession, maybe Nasser will turn a little inward, maybe we can get him more interested in Egyptian development and less interested in fomenting revolutions. Come up with an action program." The day of task forces was over by then, but the NSAM was a very useful prod. We got an answer back from State by December and then developed a new policy. The two big things in it were a multi-year PL 480 agreement because the Egyptians had just had a big crop disaster which made them extremely vulnerable. Since PL 480 was surplus disposal as far as we were concerned, the idea that we might give the Egyptians as much as four hundred million dollars worth of wheat and edible oils, etc. appealed to the President. He was always great for using PL 480.

The other thing that we didn't firm up in the action program but which is worth a comment in itself is that it included the possibility of a Nasser visit. Nasser has never been invited to an official visit to this country for obvious reasons, although Eisenhower had met him up in New York in 1960 at the U.N. session. I remember talking with the President briefly many times about this. His position invariably was that he thought a Nasser visit would be a good thing but that he had to watch the timing very carefully. I also remember that on at least two later occasions the President approved in principle specifically going ahead with the Nasser visit "at some future date." Unfortunately, every time we got to the future date, there were other things which got in the way--Yemen, etc. But he constantly had in mind the advantages of actually getting together with Nasser, the idea that by inviting Nasser here we automatically made him a first-class citizen, so to speak. Nasser is not a vain man but a man quite conscious of status. So this was a gesture of statecraft the President was in favor of as long as the domestic political timing was good. As I say, at least twice he gave us the okay for a future time, but it didn't quite work out.

The PL 480 is really the big substantive thing we did to move our policy toward Egypt onto a much more favorable basis. It turned out to be a little more expensive than we thought. I remember at one time about a month later the Egyptians did something--I don't recall what; maybe somebody in Congress had protested about the size of the new agreement, etc--but Carl Kaysen was in with the President and he asked one of those questions he was always asking to keep us on our toes: He said to Carl, "Do you think maybe we're giving too much aid to the U.A.R.?" Of course, Carl didn't have a clue as to how much aid we were giving to the U.A.R., so I sent in a little note, "Mr. President, it looks big, but it's all free." I never heard anything more about it, so I guess it served his purpose.

When you take a new policy initiative, then, of course, you begin to get a certain amount of backlash. Any initiative toward the Arabs (or Nasser, in particular, who is the most articulate and strongest foe of Israel, so the Israelis naturally concentrate on him) and you begin to get muttering in Congress and among various groups, etc. The President was naturally very sensitive to this. So once he had taken the step, he began raising these questions and saying, "Well, let's not move too far too fast. Let's put the question of the visit on the shelf," etc. So Rusk decided to live with the situation as it was but to hold off on recommending the visit until after the 1962 elections. Nasser gave a speech in late February that was strong about Israel, and this made it difficult for us. By the time April came along the U.A.R. was in economic difficulties. It was in April of 1962 that they sent their Treasury Minister over here, a pretty smooth operator and a sensible fellow.

FARMER: And a capable economist.

KOMER: That's right. We decided we would put a little more in the pot to further the project of turning the Egyptians more toward internal development, etc. So we sent [Edward S.] Ed Mason out to Cairo to find out just how much trouble the Egyptians were in and whether they had a good stabilization program. Ed came back with a favorable report. My memory may not be too good on this point, but I think Ed reported personally to the President. If not, we

gave the President a fill-in on his report to [David E.] Dave Bell. But we did go ahead with a stabilization loan which involved, in fact, about twenty million dollars. And we decided at that time we would process a certain number of development loans in 1963, too. Incidentally, though we had agreed to the PL 480 program and had told the Egyptians in the course of early '62 that this was in the cards if we could work out a satisfactory agreement, the agreement was not actually signed until August 1962.

I would say that the summer of 1962 was the high point of U.S.-U.A.R. relations. One of the things that signalized it was that Nasser wrote the President in a letter of 21 June in which he expressed a great deal of appreciation for the stabilization loan, PL 480, etc. He agreed with the President that we would have our differences--this is one thing the President always insisted on: let's not try to con this guy, in effect; let's make clear we have certain strong interests in Israel, that there are certain things about which we have agreed to disagree; but let's emphasize the things we can work together on and try to put the others "in the icebox," so to speak (that's a phrase of the U.A.R. ambassadors we all picked up and used). Anyway, in his letter of 21 June Nasser said he agreed we should keep our differences within limits not to be exceeded or something like that. And this was a very good way to put it. It was a major step forward in the tone of our relations. By the summer of 1962 we had gotten to the point where there was restored a degree of mutual confidence in the bona fides of Egypt as seen from the United States and the United States as seen from Cairo--which was the objective of this exercise after all.

At this point, circumstances or fate intervened. By September we had the death of the old Imam of Yemen. Then as soon as young Badr [Mohammed Al-Badr] came in--the guy who, by the way, had been playing around with the Russians previously and had to be pulled up short by the old man--there was a palace revolt by a military group, probably with Egyptian backing, and we had the Yemen revolution. From September 1962 on, our relations with the U.A.R. tended in practice to be dominated by the Yemen affair, right up until the President's assassination. And, of course, the Arab-

Israeli problem kept coming back in as a contrapuntal theme. But basically the trend toward a new, a much better relationship, was interrupted by the Yemen affair, which began to cause a lot of complications. I would say that U.S.-U.A.R. relations did not slide backward during the Yemen episode up to October 1963. Of course, Yemen is still going on--it's a bit of unfinished business--though we've kept it in low pressure. But the significant thing is that our relations did not slide backward despite the existence of this highly disruptive peanut crisis in which we played quite a significant role.

THE YEMEN AFFAIR--KOMER'S WAR

Let me switch now to Yemen policy, which fascinated the President, but which was terribly painful to me. (But before getting on to that there was one other thing the President and Mrs. Kennedy had a personal interest in: That was Abu Simbel, the question of how you raise the statues when the High Dam at Aswan would otherwise submerge them. Mrs. Kennedy may have brought this personally to his attention; at least I was told that she was personally interested and thought this was a very desirable thing to do. Whatever the cause, he felt that the U.S. should make a substantial contribution to this. He talked to Congressman [John J.] Rooney about it. I would include this as one of the items in the Kennedy effort to give a new cultural tone to the New Frontier).

On the Yemen affair, which has had many ups and downs and is still with us, the role of the President comes out very loud and clear. What I remember so well is that President Kennedy had from the beginning a very clear feel as to what we wanted out of Yemen. After all Yemen is a little 14th Century backwater, and one of the things people found out, including the Egyptians who had forty thousand men there at one time and have almost as many there right now, is that nobody knew very much about Yemen, about what went on in the back country and how you could control Yemen. But the President had very clearly in mind that, from the standpoint of our interest, Yemen itself didn't count for very much. If this place were on the moon or in the center of Africa and the Russians and the Egyptians or other people were not involved,

we couldn't care less what went on in Yemen. It could be a head-hunter fight in the depths of New Guinea. As long as it didn't impinge on our interests, no problem. But the trouble was that this little crisis, of no importance in itself, was a sort of vortex (as these crises tend to be) which drew in the Egyptians who, after their defeat in Syria, wanted to have at least one U.A.R.-supported successful revolution. Because it drew in the Egyptians, it then drew in the Saudis, who saw that if the Egyptians got into Yemen it would be a step toward overthrowing the Saudi regime. We kept making the point to Faisal that Yemen just wasn't a very good place from which to upset Saudi Arabia; there were high mountains, etc. I think that events have proved we were right, and the Egyptians are having a hell of a time even holding on to Yemen, much less using it as a platform from which to attack Saudi Arabia.

Once a Saudi-U.A.R. conflict over Yemen began to develop (the Egyptians sending in troops to support the revolutionary regime, the Saudis supporting the tribal leaders who were behind the new Imam, and a little confrontation developing which threatened to turn into a Saudi-U.A.R. conflict), then the President felt that U.S. interests were becoming involved. Because it was Saudi oil we were interested in in the Arabian peninsula or the British base at Aden, not so much Yemen itself; therefore, to the extent that the U.A.R. got into a fracas with poor old Saud [Saud Ibn Abdul Aziz Al Saud], our oil interests, our interests in Saudi Arabia in general, became engaged. Kennedy's idea was: let's try to figure out some way of damping this crisis down so we don't get engaged in a situation where Nasser decides to take off after the Saudis because the Saudis are cramping his style in Yemen, and that means we have to come in to protect the Saudis, which means we get into a fight with Nasser over something that isn't really very important to us. Therefore, to the extent that we could keep this thing damped down, our interests in Saudi Arabia were served. This was the fundamental thrust of our policy in Yemen and is still.

The British took an opposite tack. Our interest was Saudi oil and Saudi Arabia not Yemen; their interest was Aden because Aden protects Persian Gulf oil and also because it protects East Africa, etc. The British concluded that if the U.A.R. ever got firmly established in Yemen, it and the Yemen revolutionary regime would immediately begin to put pressure on the Aden colony, and this would upset the applecart. We argued with them that this threat might be inevitable anyway over a period of many years, but that the smart thing to do was to try to damp down the conflict--to try to get some kind of guarantees from the U.A.R. and the Yemenis in return for accepting the revolutionary regime--and that this would buy more time and create less trouble for them in the long run than would direct opposition. We opted for trying to get along with the new regime in return for certain undertakings. They took the opposite option.

I think--though here I speak from a room with a view--our policy was sounder, and I know that Kennedy certainly thought so because on several occasions he sent messages to [Harold] Macmillan saying, "Why don't you guys play it smart like we are?" Of course, the British were constantly coming back at us, suggesting we not move so fast--first on recognizing the Yemen regime, then on the disengagement agreement, etc. We had a constant dialogue with the British on this.

The President was fortified in his feeling that the British were wrong and we were right when we told him how the very savvy British Ambassador in Cairo, Harold Beeley, was in complete agreement with U.S. policy; how the British chargé or minister in Yemen, a fellow named [Christopher T.] Gandy, who is now in Kuwait (probably the ablest man who ever served in Yemen as a foreign representative) was sending messages back from Taizz, or wherever he was, saying, "Take the U.S. line. It's the only sensible way. These fellows won't get organized for years to mount a real threat against Aden. Buy some time so we can get the South Arabian Federation going," etc. So there were plenty of responsible Foreign Office types who were saying. . . .

But there were many more complications for the British than for us: the Tory backbenchers; the memories of Suez; and the fact that Yemen had a long-standing claim to Aden, which they call "South Yemen," "occupied Yemen." At one point we told the British, "Let's both recognize, and we in turn will extract promises from the U.A.R. and Yemen that not only will they agree to lay off Saudi Arabia and agree to withdraw from Yemen itself once things settle down, but that they will also agree to a settlement of their differences with the South Arabian Federation, "which the British were just then getting underway. The Brits were never able to bring themselves to do it. I think it was a mistake; I think it would have bought some time. Agreements are mortal, especially agreements with Nasser, but the case is very strong that this would have been a smart way to do it.

FARMER: Tell a little bit more about the President's involvement. In what detail was all this discussed with him? Did you have long, consecutive conversations with him about this? How was the policy made?

KOMER: The President, to my knowledge, did not have long consecutive conversations about this type of problem with anybody. About most problems he was very quick to make up his mind. He was obviously bored sitting in long sessions, though occasionally he would say, "Maybe we ought to have a meeting on this." And we would get [Dean] Rusk and Talbot and the Defense people and hash it around a little bit. Much more often we would brief him or give him some evening or weekend reading. It was a much more informal technique, by and large, with Yemen, which was much more a minor league affair, than with Vietnam or the Cuban crisis. But the answer to your question is that this President had just an amazing intellectual curiosity about all these things, and he wanted to be kept clued. So I would say that two or three times a week while the crisis was more or less hot, I would talk with him or send him little chits to keep him clued as to what was going on. Bear in mind also that he read the intelligence poop very carefully--the CIA daily, the State Department summary, etc., and a selection of the cables--so he was up to the minute on what went on in Yemen. It was not so much keeping him up on developments as on interpretation

and analysis. He was interested in knowing what my view was, what State's view was, where was this thing going, where are we coming out on this.

It was in the course of these brief discussions that he coined a most unfortunate phrase, "Komer's war." He used to ask me how my war was coming along. Of course, I redoubled my efforts to end the war. This later got out in a bowdlerized form. What happened was that Mac Bundy was talking with [Edward] Teddy Weintal, I believe, and Teddy asked a few questions about Yemen. At any rate, Mac could not resist--Mac was highly amused that the President called this Komer's war--Mac tried to improve on it and told Teddy, "When it goes well, we call it Komer's war, and when it goes poorly, we call it Talbot's war." Many months later this got published in that Reporter article where Phil Horton tried to explain how thick-headed we all were (he did a pretty poor job of it). But of course this didn't help my relations with Phil Talbot.

One reason why the President was heavily involved in Yemen was that if we really wanted to get something across, we were dealing essentially with two guys--with Nasser, who made all the important decisions in the U.A.R., and Faisal, who made all the important decisions for the Saudis. With both these fellows we had already established a tradition of personal correspondence; when we really wanted to put the bee on them, the President had to do it, and he was more than willing. The President did not play a passive role in this exercise. He was constantly asking if we should shade our aid to Nasser a little bit, how can we bring this guy around, why are we paying so much attention to Faisal's worries about the Royalists, etc? He was constantly needling us on new ideas as to how to maneuver. I must say, however, that he never pressed any points where we were able to give him a decent answer. He was very receptive to the argument that "this is the way to do business with the Arabs," or "this guy Faisal is a very difficult man. If we hurt his pride, it will cost us more," etc., etc.

As I recall, the President's first major initiative in the Yemen affair came with Faisal (I forget whether at this time Faisal had taken over), who in effect was running Saudi Arabia. There was a period when he did take over, then the King came back, and Faisal went off and sulked in his tent. Then, he came back after an interval of several months and he's been really running the show ever since. It was in October 1962, just after the revolt took place, that Faisal came here. I'm trying to remember whether we invited Faisal primarily because of Yemen. . . . At any rate, by the time Faisal got here in October, Yemen was the number one question. We had been wanting to impress on the Saudis, (and regarded Faisal as our chosen instrument for this purpose) the imperative necessity of modernizing this great, oil-rich non-country with a medieval regime and an incompetent king who is a drunkard. Faisal was the one guy in the country who might be able to put it on the road to the 20th Century, thus giving it a little stability and life expectancy so that our oil assets wouldn't be endangered by violent revolution or Egyptian-inspired coup, etc. As I recall now, State proposed the visit, and the President acquiesced on the ground that we really want to build up this guy and give him the sense that we think his interest in reform is great (just as we did with the Shah of Iran rather successfully earlier--in fact, I think I used the same argument on the President, that we really ought to get Faisal over here and give him the Kennedy treatment).

The President personally made a strong pitch to Faisal, "Don't rock the boat on Yemen. Why should you get yourself into a big to-do with the U.A.R. down in Yemen which will just lead the U.A.R. to put pressure on you? Your regime is not all that strong. Do you want to release all this ferment?" One of the things that made our point for us, (either at this time or a little later, but it came in handy), was that a couple of Saudi Air Force pilots defected to Cairo with the most modern jets in the Saudi Air Force. This really made our point with Faisal as nothing else did. At least I remember the President saying to me, "We told that guy . . ."

I notice here in this chronology that Faisal did not take over as Prime Minister until just after this business.

It was just after Faisal got here that the British decided to go actively into the Yemen civil war and stir up as much trouble as they could without overtly getting involved. The President, I recall, was a little uncomfortable that we might get out of step with the British, but he didn't insist we shift our policy. I remember that just after Faisal went back, we got another appeal from the Saudis saying, "For God's sake, do something. Our vital interests are at stake," etc. So the President wrote him a letter. It was his idea, as I recall, that we should follow up the visit and meet these latest Saudi pleas by saying, "As I told you, we're behind you 100 per cent"--let's say anything, as long as it isn't an ironclad commitment, that will make these fellows feel we're behind them so that they'll calm down a little bit.

He was also very interested--and I must say he had a fine feel--in the uses of the military as an instrument: He asked what we had in the Red Sea, where we could if necessary cut off the flow of Egyptian forces into Yemen--they were coming mostly by sea, but partly by air--and how we could reassure the Saudis by running destroyers up and down the Red Sea if necessary. The upshot was that we got a couple of destroyers to visit Jidda which was the only port on the Red Sea the destroyers could get into.

Then we began thinking how we could get this Yemen thing closed out. It was very difficult to figure out what could be done. Our thinking began going along these lines: Let's work out a trade-off by which the Saudis agree to stop supporting the Royalists; this permits the Republicans to move in; then the Egyptians get out of the country. Faisal always made very clear that he wasn't worried about Yemen; he was worried about the U.A.R. So the more U.A.R. troops that went into Yemen, the more nervous Faisal became. He was really concerned that Yemen not become a U.A.R. springboard; he didn't have any concerns about his ability to deal with the Yemeni however, as we found out later, he had apparently, because of his attachment to the monarchical institution, the club, made a certain number of promises to the Yemeni Imamate that he was on their side

against those pro-Communist, Republicans, etc. This was another thing that used to cause a wry comment from JFK that we always seemed to wind up backing kings against Republicans somehow; our clients were the ones who somehow represented yesterday rather than tomorrow. But with the oil investment we had in Saudi Arabia, we were willing to overcome these moral scruples.

At any rate, the next initiative was in November when the President said let's try and work out these arrangements. State drafted, and he approved with some changes, a letter to Faisal that we were getting around toward recognizing the Y.A.R. [Yemen Arab Republic]. Of course, this was really to notify Faisal we were beginning to make a move and reassure him of our support of Saudi integrity. We were having trouble with the U.K. [United Kingdom] at this time; they were very opposed to our recognition. Faisal too was very unhappy about this, and the President sent him another letter telling him we were with him, etc. One of the things I had to keep explaining to the President, who kept asking why didn't Faisal see the facts of life, was that Faisal saw the facts of life rather differently than we did. He thought the Royalists were winning. We said, "Look, the Egyptians are committed and will not pull out until they've got a victory. Ergo, if ten thousand won't provide victory, rather than let the Royalists lick the ten thousand, Nasser will put in twenty or thirty thousand." I remember using this argument: "If he needed eighty thousand, he'd put them in there. He can't afford to take a defeat of this magnitude; it might mean the end of him as the number one leader of the Arab world." Faisal never seemed to get this point--that the more successful the Royalists were, the more troops Nasser would send.

We now came up with the proposal which began to be called disengagement in which if the Egyptians would agree to begin to get out and the Saudis to stop aid, we would recognize, etc. There were real delays in this period. Macmillan personally got into the act writing JFK suggesting that we delay our recognition until the U.A.R. came up with more precise agreements to our proposal. On one occasion Macmillan invited the President, saying he wanted to talk on the secure phone about Yemen and another subject. The President told me to sit in on

the telecon they were going to have in the White House situation room. The President and I were alone except for the technicians who were handling the thing. He got on the phone and talked with Macmillan about the other item (I don't even recall what the item was--something to do with European policy) and then they got on to Yemen. Macmillan was apparently giving JFK some big song and dance, apparently a whole series of arguments why we should be careful not to move too fast in this situation. The President was giving him the standard replies. After they had apparently gone through the same exercise two or three times, the President got a little bored with all this discussion. So he said to Macmillan, "You and I seem to be going around in circles. I've got my Yemen expert here. Why don't I put him on, and he'll explain to you why we don't think delay is such a good idea." And he handed the telephone to me! It was like a bolt from the blue--I had never exchanged a word with the Prime Minister of Great Britain before. I swallowed hard, took the telephone, and we went through the exercise again. He was explaining why they thought delay was a good idea, and I was explaining why we didn't think a delay would buy us anything, why it couldn't do any harm and might do a lot of good to try the policy we'd been working on.

Maybe the Prime Minister got tired at this point because he finally conceded that maybe we had an argument, and he would think about it some more. Then he said to me plaintively, "Is the President still there? I presume he's gone." I was able to say, "No. The President is sitting right here." As a matter of fact, Kennedy was hugely enjoying this whole thing, sitting there smoking a cigar with a big grin at the way I was having an argument with Macmillan. But Mac Bundy mentioned to me later that right after this episode, the President asked a few questions about me, and that this really was when I made my number with JFK. From then on there was a noticeably more personal relationship. It was after this that on letters to Faisal and other items, as long as they were okay with me and if my thumbnail description made sense, he was willing to sign off on the basis of staff advice. So as the sheer product of circumstances, just because I happened to be there and because he put me on the phone in order to get him off the hook with Macmillan, I became one of the full members of the team, so to speak.

In November-December 1962 there was quite a correspondence between Kennedy and Macmillan over whether we should recognize Yemen. To the British, the Arabian peninsula, Yemen, Aden, and the U.A.R. were just a lot more important than to us. Let me modify the word important--it's not any more important to them than to us.

FARMER: But it has more emotional significance.

KOMER: Precisely. . . . A terrible drag on their politics.

The President also wrote letters to Nasser and to King Hussein [ibn Talal], who was involved in a small way, and to Faisal proposing the sort of disengagement that I described to you. Faisal's reaction was quite cold; he was very surprised that we should ask him to do any such thing. We got a similar reply from Hussein, sort of supporting Faisal. The British probably had a certain hand in that. But the interesting thing was that Nasser (who by this time was beginning to realize that he had a bear by the tail down in Yemen) sort of responded favorably to this idea, which was a bit of a surprise to us. In fact, toward the end of the month, Nasser replied orally to our ambassador that he thought he could live with our plan. Now this plan--to call it a plan is to gild the lily a little bit--was the vaguest sort of heads of discussion of possible deals--the Saudis stop, the Egyptians withdraw, etc. It was left very loose when the Egyptians would withdraw, how many troops they would withdraw, what would happen to the Royalists, etc., etc. At any rate, even though we had real reservations as to how far the U.A.R. would go, we thought it was by far the wiser course to appear to take their assurances at face value and see what we could get. So we went ahead developing these proposals. The President sent another letter to Nasser expressing appreciation for the favorable response. As I recall, about that time we were feeling sufficiently favorable toward Nasser that State recommended that we invite Nasser again. But we finessed it.

Then another complication arose. The Saudis were still shipping in arms and were being very unreceptive to our proposals. So the U.A.R. evolved this reprisal tactic, which was harassment of Saudi supply lines by one plane going over and dropping a bomb on a camel caravan, or a couple of planes going over and strafing a border crossing point in Saudi territory. The Saudis began to scream: "You told us you were 100 per cent behind us. You were going to protect Saudi Arabia. What the hell is going on?" On this the President's view was also very clear. He said it to Faisal on at least one occasion and wrote it to him on several, "We told you that we supported the integrity of Saudi Arabia; however, we have never told you we are backing your covert support for the Royalists in Yemen. Therefore, if you are deliberately inviting U.A.R. retaliation by continuing this gunrunning, you can't expect us to respond when the Egyptians retaliate against you. This isn't a threat to the integrity of Saudi Arabia; this is a border fracas." This didn't stop Faisal from coming back again and again, but he gradually got the word. We recognized the Yemen Republic on about the 19th of December, 1962.

As we got pretty close to the day--we thought about and rethought about it, etc--the thought uppermost in the President's mind was how many other countries have recognized. We were not the first by any means; we were in the middle. By that time I think about twenty had come through, including most European countries except the U.K. We also thought that by holding off till this long we had gotten the U.A.R. promises; we thought we had Faisal, although unhappy under control. So the President took the decision. Decisions on recognition were always personally a matter for the President, and they certainly were in this case.

Now we faced the problem of how we could get this vague outline of a possible disengagement scheme moving. By this time we were toying with the idea of some kind of a U.N. presence, a U.N. mediator, and maybe some kind of a U.N. border guard, but this was still very much in the initial thinking stages. Simultaneously we had this difficult problem of the harassing air raids by the U.A.R. Faisal at this time sent an appeal for U.S. jets to "come down and defend me, send some planes to deter Nasser." We had a JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff]

recommendation in January 1962 saying that was ridiculous. "Let's not employ U.S. forces in Yemen unless the politicians utterly fail." But the Saudis were getting fairly insistent. It was, I think, a matter of face as much as anything else with Faisal. Here he was utterly impotent against the Egyptians harassing him. If he had had any kind of an Air Force, of course, the Egyptians wouldn't have tried that because they might have lost some aircraft. But he only had some old F-86's and didn't even trust his own Air Force after those guys defected, so it was a problem.

We suggested that if he would agree to this disengagement scheme of ours, we would send some planes for a military demonstration. We would fly some planes in--not, as I recall, necessarily down to the border area, but as sort of a warning to Nasser, like the destroyers the President had sent earlier into the Red Sea. One of the reasons why we decided to send this show of force outfit was that we too were getting a little unhappy with these repeated U.A.R. harassing raids. After all, this was embarrassing us with Faisal. It was also causing Faisal to reach the point where he might step up his aid to the Royalists, and we'd have the thing escalating again. So we began to feel maybe we'd ought to put the blocks to Nasser a little harder. Maybe, instead of using the carrot, we ought to shift a little while to using the stick.

I recall that at the time I was advocating the stick a little more strongly than the President or Bundy were and certainly more strongly than the State Department. The State people were very much opposed to pushing Nasser too hard because they thought it would simply be counterproductive. They said, "Look, you're not going to get anywhere. All you're going to do is begin to tear down the structure we've painfully built up in the new relationship.

FARMER: The Ambassador presumably was also counseling . . .

KOMER: Counseling strongly against it, yes. An interesting sidelight is that John Badeau, who we appointed in mid-1961 was not initially in favor of the normalization policy with Nasser involving substantial aid and the attempt to reach a new relationship. He was with us in principle, but he thought it was rather premature. By December 1961 when he came back on consultation, he had become very much in favor of it and was ever after an extremely strong advocate.

FARMER: No reason why he should go around saying he wasn't to begin with, but he certainly hasn't said so.

KOMER: As a matter of fact, he's now become its strongest advocate.

It was at this point that we began to switch the tenor of our noises to Nasser toward more of the stick rather than the carrot. As early as mid-January 1963 the President wrote Nasser saying, he thought "there might be some misunderstanding of our position:" Let's be very clear we're not pursuing any double game in Yemen. We're not trying to con you into an agreement at the same time we're covertly supporting the Royalists through the Saudis. But at the same time don't think that it's just a simple matter of us telling our man Faisal to stop supporting the Royalist After all, Saudi Arabia is just as much a sovereign country as the U.A.R. is."

One of the things I liked and admired about the Kennedy correspondence was not just the style--the President was a great insister on style except with Faisal where he finally gave up--but he was all for candid, logical exposition of argument. These letters were instruments of diplomacy; they were not just instruments of good will. Previously the State Department had the attitude, in the early Eisenhower period when John Foster Dulles was Viceroy for foreign policy, that apart from making the big decisions, the President's active role in the conduct of foreign policy was largely entertaining visitors and that Presidential correspondence (except for absolutely crucial items) should be largely ceremonial as well.

But Kennedy did not go in for that. These were diplomatic demarches, and he insisted they get rewritten five or six times sometimes. I'll confess that throughout the period of the New Frontier, I had infinitely more trouble stylistically with that oversensitive grammarian George McBungle than I ever did with JFK. JFK seemed to like my style. Mac would constantly accuse me of splitting infinitives and stuff like that. Now I don't mean to suggest that Mac didn't make some perfectly grand substantive comments on some of the half-baked things I had stuck in--a lot of these things get done on the fly.

To continue with our story, instead of the British now writing us letters saying please don't recognize the Y.A.R., we now switched to a correspondence in which Kennedy was pressing Macmillan to recognize the Y.A.R. since we had taken the plunge. The President wanted to have allies and started working on Macmillan. I must say I vigorously encouraged this because if the British weren't going to be with us, they were going to be agin us and a source of constant interruption. When the British are off on a different tack than we are, not only doesn't it look good, (which is the least of the problem) but the British are actively briefing the press, working on the Secretary of State, Macmillan pressing the President, etc. You're just defending your flank all the time instead of being able to think ahead to where you're going. The President was very sensitive to this; he didn't want to get a lot of correspondence from Macmillan, so he took the initiative. I remember the President sent a message to Macmillan around the end of January saying, "Wouldn't it be wiser at this point to go ahead with this disengagement, and you guys recognize?" One objective we had in mind was to prevent Faisal from feeling he could play the British off against us. Faisal now was gravitating more to agreement with the British than with the Americans, simply because his policy was the same as theirs and ours was rather different. This created certain complications. But Macmillan wasn't giving ground. I remember his sending back one of those stalling replies, "I see the force of your argument but. . . ." Kennedy used to say you could easily tell the difference between the messages Macmillan did himself and the ones his people did for him.

At the end of January 1963, we made a second approach to Nasser to go ahead on the disengagement scheme. Nasser came back promptly accepting our disengagement proposal with the U.N. variant. This was the new thing. Now we had to figure how to get a U.N. mediator into the act. We decided we would use Ellsworth Bunker, who was available at the time and who is just a grand man. The President was so high on him from the New Guinea exercise that he was completely in agreement with this. I note from the chronology that he wrote a letter to Macmillan at the very end of January again urging that the U.K. take a look at recognizing the U.A.R. because it looked as though the U.N. thing was going to come off, did the U.K. want to be behind the parade, etc. He got an answer I think in the middle of February which was a little standoffish because just at that time the Yemeni Republicans themselves--to show you how circumstances continued to intervene--told the British that if they wouldn't recognize, they would have to get out. The U.K. had a chargé in Yemen. Well, the British took offense, and Macmillan came back and said, "How can I recognize these guys when they just asked us to leave?" The President, as I recall, made some comment that I told him if he had recognized them before, he wouldn't have gotten into this box. That was the way it went.

We had another U.A.R. bombing raid about this time and began to face up to the proposition that we were going to have to pay some kind of a price in protecting the Saudis if we were going to get the Saudis to cut off aid to the Royalists. Actually, looking at it in hindsight, these U.A.R. bombings (which really didn't amount to anything; I don't think they really accomplished very much) sure moved Faisal. Maybe the outlines of the side deal needed to get Faisal to lay off in Yemen would be for us to give him visible token of our support to deter these U.A.R. air attacks if he would stop aid to the Royalists. It was at this time that the idea came up of sending an air squadron. Bunker, when he went out, would add this to the package he wanted to discuss with Faisal. Then the President got another letter from Faisal saying, "Look, if you aren't going to support me, I'm going to look elsewhere," etc. So in late February the President decided that we would proceed with the Bunker exercise. He sent a message to Faisal saying Bunker was coming and we were 1000 per cent behind Saudi

Arabia; that we really thought it was terribly important that they disengage from Yemen; the U.N. mediator would give a certain amount of support; it would provide a face-saving device; and that we would consider stationing some air defense in Saudi Arabia to deter the U.A.R. if the Saudis would play ball with us.

This got us along into March. The Saudis were causing difficulty, and the U.A.R. was causing difficulty, so we decided to put the blocks to both of them. Once again the President wrote to Faisal saying we were terribly concerned, that he, Faisal, should understand that our differences were only over a very small affair, that the fundamental relationship remained undisturbed, etc., etc. One fascinating thing was that this proved to the President that the Arab experts, at least in the case of the Saudis, knew what they were talking about. When the President said, "Don't doubt our bona fides in supporting Saudi Arabia," Faisal was so touched by this he immediately wrote back and said, "Oh, the last thing in the world I have in mind, Mr. President, was to doubt that you were sincere in your support of Saudi Arabia," etc. Bunker was doing a magnificent job. But that's not the purpose of our exercise here.

Now the President began to feel we ought to put the blocks to Nasser much more forcefully than we had, but he was a little nervous about putting this in writing. I forget who it was who suggested let's make it an oral message, let's have Badeau go in and say, "The President asked me to tell you we may be on a collision course." This was strong language; it was my language, so I remember it very well. This was the peak of our pressure, I would say. This was in early March. There had been a couple of other bombing raids, and the President told Badeau to deliver directly to Nasser a very strong oral message that he was afraid we were on a collision course if this Yemen thing escalated; that we had made every effort through the disengagement proposal Bunker was developing to work something out that would protect Nasser's interest, that would protect Saudi interest; and that now our prestige was fully engaged. Now we had our own man out there, although ostensibly under U.N. auspices, and, by golly, if Nasser was going to continue this kind of messing around, we were in for real trouble. It was one of

the strongest messages that I have seen. In fact, we told Badeau to say--the President was very reluctant, but it was his decision that we ought to do it--that we were going to have to reexamine this whole U.A.R. policy I've been describing; i.e. make an implicit threat of withdrawal of U.S. aid and maybe something worse if Nasser didn't come around.

I mentioned that the President would occasionally get more frustrated at Faisal than Nasser. He could understand that Nasser might be maneuvering, but he wondered why the hell Faisal didn't get the point. Of course, this was partly the indirect way in which the Arab operates, especially the old-fashioned ones. So as I recall, in March at one point Kennedy sent a personal message to our ambassador saying get across to this guy the importance of his suspending aid to the Royalists. Kennedy was a great one for parlaying what we had gotten one guy to say by telling the other guy, so he said now tell Faisal that we think we've got Nasser lined up, this has been very hard, and if only Faisal will now do such and such, we will get Nasser to do so and so.

Just about this time, as I recall, we had a leak about the very tough message to Nasser. By the way, Nasser had came back and said he would call off the air raids. Then we had a leak that the United States had really laid it on the line to Nasser, and Nasser had caved. I remember Phil Talbot calling me up: "Disaster has struck. You know this is the one thing Nasser can't take. For it to get out publicly that he was forced to back down would cause him to lose tremendous face. We're in trouble. He'll probably run a bombing raid tomorrow." Well, he didn't run a bombing raid tomorrow. My memory is not too good as to where we thought the leak came from, but I'll lay you three to one I won't be far wrong if I say the British. When it serves their interest, they're great for letting out what we've been up to. We took this to the President; we were very unhappy. His thought was that if this thing goes the way you fellows fear it's going to go, we shouldn't wait to see what would happen: Why don't we tell Badeau that at his discretion he can go in and tell Nasser the President is personally embarrassed by this leak, he regards it as most regrettable, he thinks that the

Bunker mission is going very well and hopes that this won't get in the way. I thought that was a very big league thing to do. It turned out that Nasser did not immediately resume air attacks, and I don't believe the ambassador ever delivered the message. So here was a contingency exercise, but a big league one.