

**Edmund A. Gullion Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 07/31/1964**  
Administrative Information

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**Interviewer:** Samuel E. Belk, III  
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**Biographical Note**

Gullion was a United States Diplomat in Saigon from 1949 to 1952; the Deputy Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Administration from 1960 to 1961; and the United States Ambassador to the Republic of the Congo from 1961 to 1964. In this interview Gullion discusses the fighting in the Congo over Katangese secession; the UN forces involved in the Katanga fighting, including prominent generals; John F. Kennedy's [JFK] role in the Congolese crisis and various influences on his view of U.S. and UN policy in the Congo; differing opinions on the U.S. Congo policy; and the importance of Belgian and British views on the Congo to JFK, among other issues.

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Third Oral History Interview

With

EDMUND A. GULLION

By Samuel E. Belk, III

July 31, 1964  
Washington, D.C.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, we were discussing any special reaction the President [John F. Kennedy] may have had to Congolese personalities. We spoke specifically of Cyrille Adoula and Moise Tshombe [Moise Kapenda Tshombe]. Perhaps we could continue the discussion along these lines.

GULLION: Yes, well the President never, of course, met Tshombe to my knowledge. He was quite aware of the fact that Mr. Tshombe, with I think his own compliance, was being introduced into the American political scene because Katanga was being made an issue by the extreme right faction and by a large group of specially constituted supporters. I remember there was to be a freedom fighters rally in Madison Square Garden, and Mr. Tshombe had been invited to address that group. The sponsorship of this thing included all the paladins of the right and, oh, a wider range than that. It included people like President Hoover [Herbert Hoover], for example. Why President Hoover had been interested in this particular thing I don't know. Of course he knew a good deal about the mining communities, both in Rhodesia and in Elisabethville, and also perhaps it was a matter of doctrine with him. But, of course, this occasion was short-circuited by the denial of the visa to Mr. Tshombe. Actually the denial of the visa to Mr. Tshombe was really motivated by concern with the continuity and success of policy in the Congo rather than by

these American domestic political considerations, because it was quite clear that the support of the UN and the Adoula government would be very severely compromised by affording Mr. Tshombe this forum. This would have brought about a very early and premature downfall of relations with the central government and would have impaired the effectiveness of both the UN and the central government in the Congo. It is also true that there was every temptation to refuse a visa on the grounds of the persistent reviling of the United States by Mr. Tshombe, but we don't stoop, I think, to keeping people out of the country just because they attack and denounce us. However, of course, it didn't improve the general atmosphere for him.

Among the other personalities, I might mention the two generals, [Major General] Prem Chand [Dewan Prem Chand] and [Brigadier General] Noronha [Reginald S. Noronha], two Indian generals, Prem Chand being the senior, who were in command of the UN forces in the last round. Whatever might have been thought of the policies aspects of the UN operation, no one can deny that these men conducted a very brilliant operation and largely a bloodless operation at the end of the Katanga fighting. It also was one, which I'll come to presently, which presented a severe crisis when the UN troops moved clear across the Katanga and across the Lufira River, and, of course, these troops were under command of Prem Chand and Noronha. And when they did this a great hue and cry was raised in this country, and by some very responsible people, claiming that the UN forces in the field and local commanders and local administrators were exceeding their mandate and their instructions from the UN headquarters in New York. I think I've referred elsewhere in this summary to the importance of that occasion. Had this not been done, the UN would have been in effect defeated or not accomplished what it set out to do. The Katanga gendarmerie, the private army of Mr. Tshombe, would have been supreme, and the disaster, moral disaster, to the UN would have been incalculable. And I believe that all that the U.S. had put into it would have gone down the drain also. This operation, nevertheless, was conducted. I believe no one thought that Brigadier Noronha could ever get these troops across the river because there was no bridging, no boating, no boat materials, and there seemed to be no way to do it, and there were hostile elements on the opposite bank. And, of course, by a rather brilliant military feat he extemporized his crossing and practically without opposition. The whole thing was a military promenade except for the unfortunate, terrible accident of those two women who were killed in the Volkswagen as they approached patrol in Jadotville during the peaceful entry into Jadotville.

I bring all this background up because President Kennedy took the step of receiving Brigadier Noronha and his superior, General Prem Chand at the White House. Of course, I was not present at that time, being in the Congo, but it was quite a gesture, the President's.... This was not an advertised gesture; this was one of the discreet receptions, you see, where the men were received and the thing was not publicized. But I think that the President wanted to mark his appreciation of the way in which this had been done, and I would not be surprised if it didn't also show his great curiosity and interest about men who were key movers on the spot in events which he was following with great responsibility but from a distance. I think he

wanted to see what Prem Chand and Noronha were like. He'd heard so much about them from varied observers, not only from me but a great many others.

I remember Harlan Cleveland's [J. Harlan Cleveland] characterization of the role of the UN epitomized in the comment made to him by an Indian lieutenant at a checkpoint when he was asked by Mr. Cleveland why he didn't try to ventilate the area around his checkpoint or fire at someone who was trying to run past it, and this lieutenant explained, "Ah, but you see, sire, the United Nations can have no enemies." And I've heard this same thesis in the whole demonstration of the role and peculiar place of the UN developed to quite some length by Brigadier Noronha. I think that the President was interested in this situation, this kind of unprecedented role for armies, as well as in these two men. What he thought about them, I don't know. He also received another general. This was General Mobutu [Mobutu Sese Seko]. He took occasion, of course, to inquire of Mobutu about the training of the Congolese army and whether or not it could not be advanced, the general possibilities of recurrence of trouble from the Katanga gendarmeries and I'm sure he got the usual over-confident and somewhat self-satisfied answers on the part of General Mobutu. Mobutu got quite a grand tour of the military establishments in the country. At this particular interview he somewhat startled everyone by.... As the interview was drawing to a close, the President asked him if there was anything further he wanted to bring up, and the general said yes, as a matter of fact, there was, he'd like an airplane. This, I don't think the President had been briefed for that particular very Congolese request. He did get an airplane, DC 3 or a C 47, as we call them, and an American crew which was one of the things that he had requested. The President was on the spot. He more or less had to grant it. It certainly caused some worries down the line, but in the long run, I think, it gave us certain advantages and certain access to things in the Congo that we might not have otherwise had.

Mobutu is a very strange character, very Hamlet-like character who has the decisive instrument in the Congo if he wants to use it, and yet he's often away when he should be present. He's off on visits and tours when he should be pushing his men into action against rebels. I think in the very present events that are going on as we record this, Mobutu's role with respect to the return of Tshombe was brought back by popular demand. And he would not have been brought back, I don't think, without Mobutu acquiescence.

The other Congo actors in the Congo drama, I don't know that he saw many of them. He did see Sture Linnér one time when Sture Linnér was the head of the UN operations, that is civil and military, and I think he got a very good picture of the whole operation from Mr. Linnér. I was not present at that interview, and I don't recall it very well. It is interesting, however, that he followed the Congo this closely and saw this many of this number of leading personalities. I imagine that it would have been an impractical thing to do if he tried this same approach to all problems of this country and to all other nations where we had a deep involvement. It was, however, interesting, his demonstrating his belief in the utility and

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necessity of first hand contact with the people involved in actions. So much on the personality side of it.

I've been thinking over what we were talking about in our last interview. I don't want to leave the impression that the President thought that the Adoula government was a perfect government led by a paragon. He was thoroughly aware of its defects. As I say, he was constantly the subject of contending advice and opposing pressures during the long period after the Kitona convention and after the U Thant plan was proposed. It was quite important to know which side, the Katanga side or the government side, was dragging its feet. The President was always interested in written testimony as well as first-hand testimony. I remember hearing him being very impressed by what I thought was a very wretched and miserable book, this thing by Smith Hempstone with the weird title about rat's lice or Katanga gendarmie copper, I don't know, one of those catch-all titles. It had quite an impact around Washington. He was at the same time receiving all of this information from a great many people about the general deterioration of conditions on the Congo side, on the government side. And he was receiving, of course, through Senator Dodd [Christopher Dodd] the best statement of the Katanga case. He had for a number of reasons to give this hearing, and I think I did say last time that Undersecretary McGhee [George C. McGhee] came out to the Congo very much.... In his baggage he had these ideas. I think that the purpose of this really was to avoid another resort to force if further negotiation could solve the Congo problem.

To me out there, of course, it seemed that further haggling would play Mr. Tshombe's game, and this game of Katanga separatism which was to play out the string until the UN had to leave the Congo because of running out of money, and then to play the case either way it seemed to be. I did not want us to be a party to that nor did I think that the UN would break crockery if it took the initiative, and I did not think it would take the initiative. As you know, the Katangese attacked the UN, and the UN replied and the response was not the major military action or in the nature of military promenade. Perhaps this is the place to say.... Well, perhaps we'd better go on to the next question, Mr. Belk.

BELK:                   How do you appraise the mission of Mr. McGhee to the Congo?

GULLION:           It was a very important mission at a very crucial time. It was conducted with skill and devotion and tact by Mr. McGhee. On the personal level it must have been difficult for him and difficult for me. I thought the mission was ill-timed. I didn't believe in its purposes. I thought that it was too much, it had taken too much counsel of some of the fears of the Katanga supporters in this country. I could only see it playing the game of those people who believe that endless confidence could be reposed in Mr. Tshombe in spite of numerous cases in which he had twisted away from what we considered to be his given word. I thought it was dangerous to try to enter into further pacts with him while time was running out. I also realize, as I've had occasion to say to Mr. McGhee since, that all things had to be tried, that had there come another trial of force without a last recourse to



reason and effort to avoid it, then the policy of the United States in persisting in its support of the UN would have been harder to defend and might have been effectively attacked. Looked at in that context, Mr. McGhee's mission makes good or more sense.

As I say, we lived together. Had we not been good friends from the past and quite congenial companions it would have been considerably more difficult. George McGhee lived in my house there for nearly a month pursuing courses that I thought were wrong. We debated it in the house. We debated it to some degree on the cables, but he came as the President's emissary so that I was not very strongly placed to contest it. I did not want Mr. McGhee to go to Katanga without me. I thought that it would weaken my position as the emissary of the President to the country. The matter was placed to Washington, and Mr. McGhee did go without me. He was greeted down there with band rolls, "Hooray for McGhee and down with Gullion," and other sayings, "Je crache dans le visage de racist Gullion." "I spit in the face of this racist, Gullion." That sort of thing. I won't go into the meetings. Of course, I was not present at the meetings. I read the proceedings. I don't think that they were conducted in entire good faith by Mr. Tshombe. For one thing, the accounts of these proceedings were supposed to be kept confidential, but Mr. Tshombe passed them to consulates of foreign countries. In any case, this continued until the Cuban crisis occurred, and Mr. McGhee had to return home at that time.

All during this time, remember you were dealing with people who were on both sides in the Leopoldville, Elisabethville, who don't have great experience, who were mercurial, who don't always put their best foot forward. Some very serious mistakes during Mr. McGhee's mission were made by Mr. Adoula, were made by Mr. Gardner [Richard N. Gardner] of the UN. Certainly the UN gave every help to Mr. McGhee in trying to accelerate the work of the commissions convened under the U Thant plan to integrate the country's finances, banking, military purposes. The UN went all out in this effort. There was marked disagreement, though, between Mr. McGhee and the UN people on the spot as to what would happen if this were to fail, as to what military operations of the UN would be. I remember, for example, Mr. Gardner told Mr. McGhee just the night he left that if there were an attack, if hostilities did occur in spite of all of this effort to resolve the thing by conciliation, that the UN would have to neutralize the Katanga air force. Having in mind the experience of the preceding rounds when a single Katanga fighter had immobilized and paralyzed the entire United Nations force, and this appeared to Mr. McGhee, I believe, as a willingness to accept an extension of hostilities that was not realistic and that would be unfavorably viewed in the light of public opinion and government opinion in the United States, and he thought that this would not be supported. In the event, of course, there is evidence that Mr. Tshombe was planning an attack of his forces. The Swedish air force performed this cutting-out mission, neutralizing of the Katanga air force with no casualties as far as I'm aware, and it certainly contributed to making the end of this fighting as comparatively bloodless as it was.

I must say, Mr. Belk, that your question tempts me into deep water. It's hard to put

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forth a thing like this. I have the feeling that both sides ought to be gone into a great deal, and Mr. McGhee is not sitting with us. It was a valiant effort by Mr. McGhee, and one

undertaken in high conscience, and as I say had it not been undertaken our case, if I can put it that way, would have been less solid. It was a very tense time.

Now let me say this about this also. The United States did not stop the UN operation at that time. A great many leading figures in government and in the Department's concern with foreign affairs and defense felt that the UN was going too far. I did not. It was also thought that local commanders were exceeding their authority. This I found hard to believe because I had myself communicated to Washington a contingency plan of operations by the UN for what its operations would be if it came down to fighting, and this was all set forth in that plan. It was a contingency plan that it could be the case that what was outlined in the contingency plan was only hypothetical and not authorized, but it certainly could have come to surprise to no one that such operations were contemplated in case it was deemed necessary.

There were, in all of this series of complications in the Congo, critical punctuation points which comprised the three rounds, so-called, which the UN was involved in actual fighting with the Katangese elements. In each of these occasions there came a point of decision for the United States, decisions that had to be taken rapidly as to what the United States would say about them or do about them. And we were under pressure from our allies to do one thing, and they would hope that we would go along and take the same line that they did. But in the two preceding cases we supported the UN actions. I do not have with me, I can't recall the nature of the statements, they were White House statements as I recall them. And, of course, in the final action there was grave temptation as the day I succeeded day, and headline succeeded headline, and the fighting seemed to continue, there was a grave temptation on the part of the United States that government just try to throw all its influence into the occasion and stop the movement which I thought would have been a great mistake. Some men were for stopping it; some were not for not for stopping it. There's no need to go into individual roles now, and some historical hindsight will have to be done. The point that I want to make is President Kennedy could have stopped it. I can't follow the, from where I was I could not follow the process by which the cases were submitted for decision to the White House. All I know is what would have been decisive as our turning point in our policy would have been if the President had at any time withdrawn his support from the UN at a time when it would have been very easy to do so and might have, easy to get popular support.

On this thing I do recall one conference that I had with him after the September round. In September '61 when I was back here and I was leaving his office in the White House and I wanted to make one point clear to him, I said that I didn't think or I thought there should be no need for another round, but that it should occur, if there should come a trial of force between the UN and Katanga that it should proceed. I thought that the military strength of the Katangese had been overestimated, that the UN was in a much better position and that

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moreover the, it was inconceivable that the purposes of the United Nations organization and U.S. policy should be thwarted in this way. The President was much taken with this, taken, he was. Of course, this point of view of mine had very grave implications which he saw. He detained me in the corridor, the short corridor between his office and Mrs. Lincoln's [Evelyn

N. Lincoln] office and leaning on one wall and I on the other we discussed this at some time. He said, "You mean, then, that you think that if there was to be another round that the rap should not be applied to the UN," and I said, "Precisely, that's what I believe." Now, I would not have dared to pin the President down to a decision in a corridor conference in a hypothetical question of such great importance as that, and, of course, the President is much too wise a man and in too grave a position to take of such a thing. I can only say that my personal impressions, man to man encounter, was that if this occurred he would understand the reasons for the UN attitude and mine and that I had expectation, the UN had expectation, of backing if this should occur.

I had occasion to recall this meeting frequently during the period I was out there because there were not, there was not only one round that ensued, there were two rounds that ensued. The critical one was, of course, the end of the thing in December of '62. There I think that we tried to make clear from Leopoldville that the crisis was not only in Elisabethville or in Katanga because all the accumulated sins of omission and commission of the Adoula government, as well as the erosion of the infrastructure of the country and the financial plights largely caused by the withholding of Katanga revenues, were coming to a head. The Adoula government was on the point of being thrown out and thrown out by a combination of Mr. Tshombe's Conakat Party and the far leftist Gizenga-Lumumbist elements who were voting together. The government decided to prorogue Parliament. It would not have had the courage to do so, I do not believe, had not the UN operations succeeded. And the UN operation bitterly disappointed the Soviet Ambassador, I think it's fair to point out at this time. No one more so because whereas it might have infuriated certain doubters, detractors of the UN in this country, it depressed and dismayed the Soviet representative because their line had been that the UN was merely the creature of the United States, and the United States also owned the Union Miniere with the Belgians just being a patsy, that therefore the United States' man was really Mr. Tshombe and that the United States would never permit, tolerate anything that appeared to confront Mr. Tshombe with the force of the United Nations, that we were just play-acting. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, promised the Congolese that if they would throw out the UN that they would give the Congolese what they needed to get rid of Katanga secession in a matter of weeks.

I didn't think that this account would be complete, would be so difficult to thread one's way through all of the contending evidence and even, I imagine, the President in his conversations with Lord Hume or with the Belgians or with the people who were friendly to those points of view could always sympathize with the elements in their cases which appeared sound to him, so that I think that when you go back over this history and try to say what was the President's role, it won't be as simple as I've considered it to be on the basis of

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my knowledge and contacts with him. I think that the decisive thing was to.... However, which is really indicative and is really evidence is the role not merely of abstaining from condemning the UN during its periods of operations, but the fact that they were actively sustained. The statements from the White House at that time in which the President must have been consulted were in that sense, deploring fighting but supporting the UN.

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, to come back just a minute to the McGhee mission, what changes, if any, did you perceive in the President's attitude toward the Congo as a result of that mission?

GULLION: Well, it obviously occurred to me to wonder if the President's mind had changed because I always felt that if the issues were presented to the President that his views of the situation were the same as mine. Whatever influence I had in this situation, of course, stemmed from this point, from my feeling and also, I think, that others thought that this was probably the case also, which certainly helps strengthen the hand of a representative abroad. I certainly was aware, of course, of the doubts that must be being raised constantly in the President's mind. It was my constant endeavor to anticipate those doubts and to try to get him all that he needed to resolve them. Without losing my objectivity I nevertheless felt that it was very incumbent upon our mission to present the facts. There were certain things that we were in a better position to witness than anyone else was.

Obviously, what happened in the Congo was so much a function of what was happening in the United States. I think I may have said in this interview that we felt out there that it was not a difficult thing intellectually or ethically to know what ought to be done. The problem was would it be done in view of the pressures in the United States within the United States government and in the American public opinion with its potential for American politics. Even such a thing now as the retention of the UN forces in the Congo and, of course, this is another thing on which we had occasion to apply to the President and here again, I think, his influence was decisive. You know the UN was to leave the Congo in June of last year, and we obtained an extension of it up until December of last year. Events seemed to show that even that was much too soon, but, of course, the money ran out. People wanted to see if the Congo could stand on its own two feet. The Adoula government itself realized it was incurring a liability by seeming to be merely the creature of this international organization, but letting him go seemed to be dangerous. But here the President, I think, and the White House, under his leadership, were decisive in securing the prolongation of the UN stay. What was your question again there, Sam? I think I've strayed.

BELK: It was simply whether there was a change in the President's attitude...

GULLION: Oh, yes.

BELK: ...as a result of the mission.

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GULLION: It did occur to me to wonder about this, of course, because this was somewhat without much explanation. I think that there might have been some feeling that I was *au cat e pris* in this thing, not on the part of the President but my colleagues may have thought that I was identified with one solution. There was still time to look at the other. My own feeling was that we'd tried out the other, that we'd tried the Kitona experiment which was the President's big initial endeavor in trying to bring

these people to conciliate them, and my view was and that of the UN was that this was not being put into effect. The Katona agreement had been frustrated. Both sides had something at fault, but I thought the greater fault was on the Katanga side. The same with respect to the execution of the U Thant plan. I do not believe, although it worried me, I do not and did not believe that the President had changed his mind on the policy. I merely felt that he had to make this move. He had to do it; otherwise it would look as if he had not exhausted every avenue for peaceful conciliation, and he had to carry along Congress, he had to carry along our allies, and he had to satisfy his own conscience. And looked at in this light I can see why the McGhee mission, I believe, too, that had I been able to see him again and explain to him, he would have seen why it was for me a very difficult passage.

BELK: Ambassador Gullion, what were the views of Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk] and Undersecretary Ball [George W. Ball] and others in the Department, and was the President fully aware that the town was divided on our Congo policy?

GULLION: Well, on the latter part of the question, yes, oh most assuredly. Any third assistant to the desk officer was aware of that. And as they used to say laughingly, the President was the senior Congo desk officer. He was definitely aware of this. Well, of course, Secretary Rusk and Undersecretary Ball supported our policy in the Congo, and Undersecretary Ball made an address, I believe, around September or October or November '61 which articulated better than I could have done at that time the premises of that policy. Now both Secretary Rusk and Mr. Ball were very much, even more so than the President perhaps, subject to the contending pressures. I saw it dramatized right in the Department, of course, with the advice from EUR [Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs], European Affairs area and from the Brussels Embassy together with what I was saying and what was being said by the African division. No one throughout all this thing could have traced an absolutely unwavering line of conduct, and I think that questions, tactical maneuvers, certainly occurred to Secretary Rusk and Mr. Ball, plus which they had all sorts of preoccupations all over the world. They couldn't spend their whole time on the Congo. One of the odd things about the Congo is what, over a period of three years the disproportionate amount of time it exacted from world leaders, Hammar skjöld's [Dag Hjalmar Agne Carl Hammar skjöld] days and nights, U Thant's, the White House, everywhere. Here is a problem without the tremendous obvious stakes of Vietnam, for example, the numbers of men and the amounts of money involved, yet the amount of time that's required to follow all those switches and to keep up with the complications is so disproportionate. And I think that the Secretary had to delegate a great deal of Congo matters to others if he was going to get the day's work done.

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BELK: Ambassador Gullion, what else could you say about how the President felt toward the attitude of Belgium and others of our allies involved in the Congo?

GULLION: I can't recall first hand authentic indications in the form of what he told me or what he said on this question. As I say he was constantly being presented with the Belgian views or the British views, and Lord Hume's visits to this country would hear the British views. Of course, they were generally not as all out in support of the UN, more in the support of half-way house solutions if I might call them that. I used to fancy that after one of these visits I would see a little fluctuation in our policy. They would have to be firmed up again.

The President, if I can go back to some things, as I say I think that the deep well-rooted thing in him came all the way back from his interest in our involvement in Indochina and Algiers. He knew that there were two sides to these problems, and his first contact with them had been more an early contact, the kind that leaves a lasting impression, perhaps, had been to learn that there was much more to this case of the former colonial territory, the former colony, than is easily assumed or that meets the eye when you hear of it through the filter of the colonial power. When he came to be President, of course, he was in a very different role and had to give tremendous account to the alliance thing. His whole hope was, as that of anybody of the Congo, was that we could work out a common denominator of policy with the Belgians and with the British, and we did finally arrive at that. Even the Belgians came around to supporting prolongation of the UN in the Congo, combination of self-interest, perhaps, but also the work of a great man like Mr. Spaak [Paul-Henri Spaak], who saw the stakes involved, who wanted to be aligned with the United States. I think this is also partly the work of the President in doing this because he was never one, as I say, to ride off on some completely Don Quixote kind of mission in behalf of a frustrated ex-colony just per se. He certainly, no better case could be shown of the weighing up of all the contending influences. I should try to remember a good deal more things to instance this. It's difficult to do right offhand without sort of chronology before me, but I do believe that at any given point of crisis I could see the effect of representations by the Belgians or by the British.

BELK: This is the third tape of an interview of Ambassador Edmund A. Gullion, former United States Ambassador to the Republic of the Congo, Leopoldville. The interviewer was Samuel E. Belk, National Security Council staff. The date is July 31, 1964. The place the White House.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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