

**Thanat Khoman Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 10/28/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Thanat Khoman  
**Interviewer:** Ivan Campbell  
**Date of Interview:** October 28, 1964  
**Place of Interview:** Bangkok, Thailand  
**Length:** 8 pages

**Biographical Note**

Thanat Khoman was the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Thailand from 1959 to 1971. This interview focuses on the John F. Kennedy [JFK] administration's policies on Southeastern Asia and Khoman's founding of the John F. Kennedy Foundation in Thailand to honor JFK after his assassination.

**Access**

Open

**Usage Restrictions**

According to the deed of gift signed February 3, 1965, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

**Copyright**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

**Transcript of Oral History Interview**

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

**Suggested Citation**

Thanat Khoman, recorded interview by Ivan Campbell, October 28, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

AGREEMENT ON USE OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I, Thanat Khoman (name), of 123 Petburi Road,  
Bangkok, Thailand (place), assign to the United States of  
 America for administration by the John F. Kennedy Library, Inc.,  
 all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and  
 transcript of the interview conducted with me at The Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs (place) by Ivan M. Campbell  
 (interviewer) on behalf of the John F. Kennedy Library, on  
October 28, 1964.

Subject to any conditions specified by me limiting access  
 to those materials and set forth in writing on the transcript  
 prior to its being forwarded for the Library, such transcript  
 and recording may be made available for research, dissemination,  
 reproduction, publication and other appropriate use, in whole  
 or in part, as determined by the Director of the Library.

(Signed) Th. Khoman

(Date) January 6, 1965

Accepted:

(signed) Wmuel. Looer

(date) Feb. 3, 1965

Thanat Khoman– JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Impressions of John F. Kennedy [JFK]
2	Unrest in Laos
3	JFK administration's policies in Thailand and Vietnam
4	Belief that South Vietnam was key to stopping Southeast Asia from becoming communist
5	Peace Corps in Thailand
6	Learning of JFK's assassination
7	Founding of John F. Kennedy Foundation in Thailand

This is Ivan Campbell in Bangkok. Today is October 28, 1964. The place is the office of His Excellency Thanat Khoman, Foreign Minister to Thailand.

Our purpose is to record material which would otherwise not be put down on paper, and consequently forever lost to future historians.

This is an oral history in which you give your impressions, Your Excellency, of President Kennedy, his policies, achievements, his mistakes, his failures, if you wish.

Ivan Campbell: "Your Excellency, when did you first meet John F. Kennedy?"

Thanat Khoman: "I had the honor and the pleasure of meeting President Kennedy in Washington in 1962; I went there to have discussions with the United States Government as a result of which a joint communique was issued by the governments of United States and Thailand."

Ivan Campbell: "What were your impressions of the man John F. Kennedy?"

Thanat Khoman: "We have heard about President Kennedy a great deal through the press, radio and other media. We knew that he was still a young man, that he was intense in his desire to preserve and maintain peace. We learned about his past records as senator, but when I first met him at the White House in Washington, I was impressed not so much by his youth but his intense desire to do something and to achieve something to keep the peace in the world. He was at the same time quite relaxed in his demeanour but you can see in his eyes the intensity of his mind, of his intellect and also - - if I may say so - - the throbbing of his heart, which longed for a firm and sound peace. We discussed a great deal about the situation in Southeast Asia, the situation in Thailand, the situation in neighboring countries; Laos, South Vietnam and others. But everything leads to one simple question: how could peace and stability be maintained in Southeast Asia? How could freedom and independence be preserved for nations which want to remain free and independent? After a rather long discussion he took me to meet the members of the Joint Chiefs of the Staff, including some of the members, I believe, of the National Security Council, and he introduced me to them. I particularly remember General Taylor and also a few others. At that time they were meeting in the room adjoining the room in which he received me, I think the gesture of introducing me to the members of his staff of the National

Security Council or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I do not exactly recall--I think the fact that he took me to meet with them is an indication that he is not alone in persuing the endeavors to maintain and preserve peace but at the same time he has very able advisors who worked very closely with him to achieve that objective."

Ivan Campbell: "Present Kennedy was a man of thought and action. Do you recall in his inaugural address, he said ask not what America will do for you, but what we together can do for the freedom of man? Your Excellency, very little concerned President Kennedy more than peace among nations and United States relations with Thailand. Then, in that respect, Your Excellency, would you comment upon United States assistance to Thailand, with particular reference to aid to Thailand's countersubversion efforts."

Thanat Khoman: "If I may recall, soon after his election and after he assumed the high office of the presidency of the United States, one of the first things that he did was to go to Vienna to meet with the heads of the Soviet Government. I do not know the details of that meeting. But I think I could presume that if he went to Vienna to meet with the leaders of the Soviet Union, it was because President Kennedy must have thought that the situation of the world at that particular time warranted his meeting with the leaders of the Soviet Union who are heads of another world, and if the peace and stability in the world would be preserved such a meeting was necessary. After that meeting we saw that some efforts were done to untangle the situation in Laos which at that time was in a critical stage, and also that meeting led to the Geneva Conference to settle the problem of Laos. Now the problem of Laos, the situation of Laos, had a very close and very deep bearing on the situation of Thailand, because if there were disturbances in Laos, such disturbances could and did spill over into Thailand. The effects and consequences of the situation in Laos could be gauged in Thailand in many ways, especially the activities of the communist agents working at the Laotian base bordering Thailand. Many agents were sent from Laos into Thailand to engage in illegal activities of infiltration, subversion and possibly of insurgency. The government and the people of Thailand were alerted to such a danger and we did everything we could to prevent the situation from developing into a stage where insurgency would be carried out by the communists and the pro-communist factions. Crash programs were started to open up the areas which were the objectives of infiltration and subversion by

the communists from the Laotian base. A great deal of money, of energy, people were consecrated to that task of preventing the communists from achieving their aims. And the United States, knowing the determination of the Thai Government and the people not to allow the communists either from Laos or elsewhere to set up a base of operation in Thailand, has come to our aid. President Kennedy, his staff and his colleagues in the United States Government were aware of the efforts by the Thai Government and people, and he readily cooperated through the agencies of the United States Government in Thailand. We are deeply appreciative of that understanding, sympathy and cooperation extended by President Kennedy himself and his government. The result is that, by nipping in the bud the communist activities in the Northeast and the North of Thailand, we denied them the possibility of setting up a base of operation against Thailand and perhaps also against the whole of Southeast Asia."

Ivan Campbell: "In relation to his statesmanship, you touched upon Laos, Your Excellency. Could you reflect a moment on his policies in relation to Thailand and Vietnam?"

Thanat Khoman: "Well, as I said, the main objectives of President Kennedy, as I understood them, were to seek ways and means of denying those who wanted to create conditions which may lead to hostility and conflict in the world the possibility of carrying out their desire. And that was, I think, the object of the meeting in Vienna. Now after that meeting the result as we can now gauge, since time has elapsed, was the intention of President Kennedy was to try to work out some sort of an agreement or modus vivendi with the head of the communist world, to prevent communist activities from spreading to Southeast Asia and from denying the communists the possibility of taking over the free areas of Southeast Asia. Now, Laos at that time was in turmoil. The agreement, I believe, was to convince the head of the Soviet Government, and consequently the head of the communist world, that they had no advantage in seeing turmoil reach a critical point in Laos or in South Vietnam, and it was an attempt to trust the head of the Soviet Government and the communist world that they might do something. They might influence the other communist elements, especially the Asian communists to work for peace rather than work toward aggression and toward spreading the seeds of conflict and hostility in Southeast Asia. Now, the agreement arrived at in Geneva may have proved to be somewhat different from what could be expected then - - I'm talking about 1961 and 1962. In any case the efforts and the attempt were worthwhile. If it did not

solve the problems, at least it clarified the position of the European communists vis-a-vis the Asian communists, and for better or for worse the Geneva agreement has a part in keeping Laos from being the stage of larger conflict. So, I think, we can give at least this credit to the Geneva agreements.

"Now in regard to South Vietnam, I think President Kennedy and the United States Government then were fully aware that the South Vietnamese, or the Vietnamese situation, is the keystone to the whole of Southeast Asia. I myself had the opportunity of expounding the same view as far back as in 1959. While most people were preoccupied with the situation in Laos, I tried to draw the attention of the members of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization to the fact that South Vietnam was in fact the key to the whole situation. If South Vietnam could be kept free from domination by the communists, we could have the hope that Southeast Asia could be free from communist control and domination. Now, of course, we can see much more clearly than before that South Vietnam holds the key to the peace and stability of the whole of Southeast Asia. If South Vietnam were to fall, then, as well as now, at least the outer ring in Southeast Asia--of course, I am talking from Thailand so I consider the former Indo-Chinese states as the outer ring--if South Vietnam were to fall, it would be indeed difficult if not impossible to keep Laos from communist control and domination, and that is also valid for Cambodia. Therefore, the situation in South Vietnam has a very important bearing on Thailand, because, as I said, South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos represent the outer ring as far as Thailand's defense is concerned. If the outer ring were to fall, then the danger, the threat, the menace will be applied directly against Thailand, because Thailand geographically is the heart of the whole of Southeast Asia. Then we will be the front line. At present, the battles, the struggles are being waged yet on the outer ring, so we are aware of this situation, and we are trying to do what we can, everything we can, to prevent the communists from taking over those countries and coming directly to our doorstep."

Ivan Campbell: "In respect to South Vietnam and the critical situation, Your Excellency, would you care to remark or comment on any reflections you might have as to anything that might have been done differently during the Kennedy years."



Thanat Khoman: "Well, it's always very difficult to say what could have been done differently. If I may be so frank as to say, I would say that if what has been done under President Kennedy could have been done earlier, if the same awareness that existed under President Kennedy's administration could have existed a few years before and appropriate measures taken accordingly, then perhaps the situation might be somewhat influenced. But, of course, it is very difficult to alert the governments and peoples far away from the scene of difficulties and danger. It always takes a little time to draw attention to the dangers and to the threats. But I don't think the situation is too late. I would even say that if no measures had been taken under President Kennedy's administration then it would have been too late."

Ivan Campbell: "Hindsight is always better than foresight, Your Excellency. Your comments on President Kennedy as a man of thought and action fits well on what you have said. Would you care to comment on the Peace Corps, particularly as it applies to Thailand."

Thanat Khoman: "I am willing to say that the Peace Corps idea is indeed a generous idea. It is well that governments should come into contact with one another. It is well to have diplomats stationed in many parts of the world. But I think it is even more important for the people to come into contact with one another, to have first-hand knowledge, first-hand experience and also first-hand ideas about what we should do in this world to keep peace and to develop friendly relations between the nations of the world. That is why we have accepted the idea of receiving members of Peace Corps in Thailand. I think the first time when this idea came into contact with us was at my house. I had the pleasure and the privilege of receiving Mr. Sargent Shriver in my home. He came to explain to us the idea of the Peace Corps. I asked him about the details of this organization. And after learning of the details, I told Mr. Shriver that I was prepared to recommend to my government to accept members of the Peace Corps in Thailand. My government decided to accept, and what I can say now is that the number of Peace Corps people in Thailand has increased by many folds since the first Peace Corps members came to Thailand. These young people who came here with no diplomatic privilege, no status whatsoever, but simply as young men and women, came with the only thing they can offer; that is goodwill, and indeed they offered us their goodwill and also their knowledge, their skill. And they came to live with our people not in hotels, not in sumptuous houses, but in our farmers' huts, sharing

their food and the roof. From what I heard, they were not disappointed by the rough and sometimes primitive life they had to lead. Even from those precarious and rather primitive conditions they have learned something. They learned that our people here in Thailand are animated by an immense goodwill, admiration and respect for the American people, even though many of them have never seen a picture of the United States. But since they met some of the American youth, now they know that at least they can count on friends beyond the ocean. So, I think, the idea of bringing a people into direct contact with one another is indeed the most profitable and the most generous idea."

Ivan Campbell: "Your Excellency, I wonder if you would mind commenting on what your feelings were on that Saturday morning in November, almost a year ago when you were informed about the assassination of John F. Kennedy."

Thanat Khoman: "I suppose like many other people, I heard the news of President Kennedy's assassination through the radio with great shock; he was so young, he was so active, he was so keen and intense in his desire to work for his country and also for the peace of the world. I couldn't say a word. The only thing I could say was to tell my wife of the sad news. I can tell you that afterwards I talked to my mother who is close to 80 years old, and she told me that in spite of the fact that she has never met or seen President Kennedy the tears came to her eyes. The first thing that I did after I learned of the news was to get in touch with my headquarters in the Foreign Office in Bangkok. At that time, I was not in Bangkok; I was at the seaside in South of Thailand. The Prime Minister was ailing then; the former Prime Minister and I got in touch with the Office of the Prime Minister so that we could proceed with some formalities like sending telegrams of condolences, and also prepared for a trip for the funeral of President Kennedy. Unfortunately, there were no planes available because it was a weekend. The event occurred during the weekend. So, even though the Government of Thailand appointed me as its representative to the funeral of President Kennedy, I couldn't make the trip because there was no plane available, and if I were to go ahead in any case, I would arrive after the funeral. So, I decided not to go and then the Government of Thailand appointed our Ambassador in Washington to represent Thailand."

Ivan Campbell: "In conclusion, Your Excellency, would you comment on the John F. Kennedy Foundation in Thailand which has been founded on Your Excellency's initiative."

Thanat Khoman: "I can say that the idea of doing something to perpetuate President Kennedy's memory came to my wife and to myself spontaneously. We did not consult with anyone. We only talked about that, and we thought that something has to be done here in Thailand to keep the memory of President Kennedy alive especially his good deeds, his lifetime efforts to serve not only the American nation, but faraway nations like those of Southeast Asia, like Thailand. We thought that the future generations in this country would want to know what President Kennedy had done for them, even though indirectly. We want them to learn about the efforts of one man to serve his country, to serve the cause of international peace, to serve the cause of human dignity, the cause of justice, indeed the cause of the whole of mankind. We felt sure that the future generations in Thailand will benefit from the experiences through which President Kennedy had gone, indeed his whole life, his efforts, his sacrifices and the circumstances of his death. Even though he may belong to a faraway country, the youth of Thailand could draw an inspiration from his devotion to his people and to many other freedom loving people in the world. That is why we started the John F. Kennedy Foundation. Instead of suggesting to the Thai Government to build a statue of the late President, I thought that the Thai people would want to take part in this memorial to the late President -- to President Kennedy. And I thought that since President Kennedy was a man of ideal as well as action, and because of his youth, and because of the fact that he was deeply interested in the youth, not only the youth of his country but the youth all the world over, I set as an objective or rather we set as an objective of the John F. Kennedy Foundation that it should be dedicated mostly to education, to good understanding between the peoples of the United States of America and Thailand, and that would be a living organization in which not only the government would take part, but also as many people as possible in Thailand. And indeed since the establishment of the John F. Kennedy Foundation, contributions have poured in from many sources and many quarters. Many contributions are very modest, because they came from school children, teachers. Some other contributions are large because they came from business people and from government people. But I can say that the John F. Kennedy Foundation represents the people of Thailand. It does not represent only a section or a portion of the Thai people.

All the Thai people have joined in to commemorate the good deeds and good actions of President Kennedy, and they want that Foundation to work in confirmity with the ideals in which President Kennedy believed. We have a modest start, but I am sure that in the future this Foundation will continue to grow and will perform the services that President Kennedy would himself have expected of the Foundation."

Ivan Campbell: "Its purpose, then, Your Excellency, is in education."

Thanat Khoman: "Especially in education and, as I said, to develop and promote the good understanding between the people of Thailand and the people of the United States through exchanges of teachers, students, artists, scientists, people from all walks of life. We will try to do it, but we are not in a hurry; we want to do things as well as possible. So we first want to gather strength before we do something, and once we feel that we have enough strength we will do the things which we hope will honor the memory of President Kennedy."

Ivan Campbell: "That is indeed a noble purpose. Thank you very much, Your Excellency."

The preceding has been an appraisal of the Kennedy years by His Excellency Thanat Khoman, Foreign Minister to Thailand recorded on October 28, 1964 in Bangkok, Thailand. This is Ivan Campbell in Bangkok.