

Alberto Franco Nogueira, Oral History Interview – 10/12/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Alberto Franco Nogueira (1918-1993) served as Portugal's Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1961 and 1969. This interview focuses on the difficulties of Portuguese-American relations, Nogueira's impressions of John F. Kennedy (JFK), and the question for NATO regarding the use of nuclear arms, among other issues.

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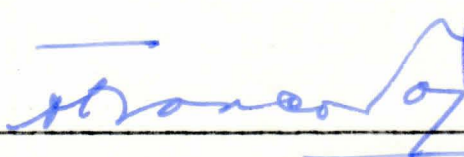
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Dated Lisbon, May 18th, 1967

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Alberto Franco Nogueira—JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

DR. ALBERTO FRANCO NOGUEIRA

October 12, 1966
Lisbon, Portugal

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

NOGUEIRA: I never met Mr. Kennedy while he was a Senator. I became Foreign Minister of Portugal in May, 1961, and in the course of the next year, that is 1962, I met President John F. Kennedy for the first time. It was in Washington, at the White House, at half past four in the afternoon. The day was the 23rd of October, 1962. The Cuban Crisis was on and at its peak. On the day before, the President had made his decisive speech to the nation where he disclosed that Soviet Union's missiles had been found in Cuba, and formulated American policy and, at the same time, announced the blockade of Cuba.

On that day, October 23rd, I had lunched at the State Department as a guest of Mr. Dean Rusk. It was a small lunch. [C.] Burke Elbrick and Alexis Johnson, my old friend from Japan times, were present. Foy Kohler was also present. The atmosphere was more than tense, it was charged with deep emotion and gloom. Alexis Johnson kept saying that at any time anything could happen. After lunch someone brought in large new pictures taken by American planes over Cuba and showing the missiles and the launching platforms. Dean Rusk showed them to me. Rusk asked whether the pictures had already been sent to the President. The answer was yes.

Just after 4 o'clock, I left the State Department, and I headed for the White House to make sure I was there on time. When I entered his office, the President greeted me in a very pleasant way. The Portuguese Ambassador [Pedro T. Pereira] and

Ambassador Elbrick were there, too. I paid my respects to the President and expressed my deep appreciation for receiving me at a time when he was deeply concerned with very grave problems of utmost importance for the whole world. The President thanked me and at once tackled the field of Portuguese-American relations. It was more than obvious that he did not intend to discuss Cuba during our meeting. He started off by saying that he was aware of many difficulties between Portugal and the United States. He went on to say that he had given instructions that all small points of irritation and all the unnecessary causes of tension and friction should be eliminated and removed.

I said I appreciated what he was telling me, but I asked the President's permission to submit that the reasons for the difficulties were deeper than that; could I elaborate on this point? The President asked me to do so. I then made a ten or twelve minute exposé on our policy in Africa. As I spoke, I watched the President. He was obviously making a strenuous effort to listen to me and to bend his mind away from the Cuban situation.

I don't believe that I succeeded in attracting the President's real attention, except when I said that the Soviet Union would never make an official Communist state or a satellite from any of the new African countries because that would then act as a brake on American anti-colonialist policy, and the Soviet Union did not wish that to happen because the Russians wanted the United States to go on with the same policy in Africa, destroying the West in Africa, and playing their hand precisely as Moscow wanted it to be played.

From this point on, I felt I really had the ear of the President. I also felt that I had made another striking remark when I observed that the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] NATO alliance could not meet a global Communist attack with that limited Western solidarity which was the net result of American policy.

The President was clearly impressed with these two observations. He had been restless, nervous, hardly controlling his impatience, although always correct and polite. After these two remarks, what had started as a courtesy call, turned into a serious and useful interview. The President then put to me many questions on African matters. He listened very carefully to my answers; he insisted on his friendship for Portugal. I pointed out how strong were the feelings which

his policies had aroused in my country. The President promised to see what could be done to improve our relations. As he saw me to the door, I pointed to his model ships around the room. He remarked that there was not a Portuguese ship. I promised to send him one. He asked me to convey his deep respects to Prime Minister Salazar.

I saw President Kennedy again in 1963 on his birthday. As I entered his secretary's office, he was sitting on the corner of the desk drinking coffee or tea from a container. Dean Rusk was standing in front of him. I congratulated the President on his birthday. The President laughed and asked how old I was. I said I also expected to be forty-six, but in two years time. The President laughed heartily and said that I was much too young to be Foreign Minister. I asked the President's kind permission to submit that he hardly had any moral authority to object to young people holding high office. The President observed that he was much older, indeed, and that in two years time, I would realize how right he was. Turning to Rusk, he asked whether he suddenly looked that morning much older than yesterday. Rusk said that both the President and me looked very young, indeed, and what about him. The President was obviously in a very good mood.

As we were exchanging these friendly jovialities, his secretary came to inform that the NATO Secretary General, Dirk Stikker, and some NATO Foreign Ministers were already waiting in the President's office. I went in with Mr. Kennedy, and as we entered the office together, the others were clearly surprised at what appeared to be my intimate relations with Mr. Kennedy. The President thanked Stikker and the Ministers for their visit. [Paul-Henri] Spaak was there; [Evangelos] Averoff was also there, and so was the Turkish and one or two other Ministers. Someone mentioned the Cuban Crisis of 1962. The President said that at one point he had feared that war would break out. In his view, the Russians had not thought about the sea and were taken by surprise with the blockade of Cuba. Some of the Ministers were very flattering to the President, and even subservient in praising his genius, his courage, his foresight, his services to the free world. I was sitting next to Mr. Kennedy. He did not seem to be unduly moved or impressed with such statements. I kept silent throughout. He then spoke about NATO solidarity and stressed the need to keep it. He stated that the question of nuclear

arms for NATO should be dealt with on the basis of equality and solidarity. Then he turned to China and expressed his preoccupations with the growing Chinese power. The Chinese were becoming more and more aggressive and belligerent, the President said, and the West had to consider what to do about it. He spoke of the West, but he obviously meant the United States. Suddenly, the President looked tired and absentminded, and his eyes were looking far into a very remote horizon. There were prolonged silences and pauses, the meeting took on a sad atmosphere.

After a few minutes we moved out to the Cabinet Room where the NATO ambassadors and staff had assembled. Everybody standing, there was an exchange of greetings between the President and Dirk Stikker. And then, again to everybody's great amazement, the President and I left together, and we went direct to his office for my private audience with him. We sat by ourselves. The President seemed to have his mind set far away. I tried to pick up the conversation where he had left it. I mentioned China and I asked how serious the Chinese threat was. The President asserted that it was very serious, indeed. He added that the Chinese had to be stopped. China had to be prevented from being the world menace. The President, as though he was thinking aloud, said to me, "The Chinese threat is very serious. The day will come, and it is fast approaching, when we in the West have to decide whether to use the atomic bomb on China so as to prevent the Chinese from making atomic weapons." I repeated this phrase, asking the President if I had understood it correctly, and he confirmed that I had. He suggested that I should not quote it. I assured him that I would not.

Then the President turned to Portuguese-American relations. He said that he did not realize how complicated the problems of Africa were. He asked me what was Portugal's secret in matters of race relations. He understood that Brazil was a success from that point of view, and he had been told that in the Portuguese overseas territories there was no racial tension. How did we achieve that? I asked the President whether I could speak freely and frankly. He begged me to do so. I ventured to say that the approach to that question in the United States has been wrong. It could not be mixed up with politics of a domestic nature, and this was not a subject to be dealt with in terms of elections and votes. It was a sociological and a moral problem, not a party political issue.

Laws, regulations, legislation, speeches, appeals to emotion, and so on, all this was, in my view, the wrong approach. The result was that the Negro community in the United States was behaving more and more like a state within a state, not like a group of good American citizens. The President followed my answer with great attention. He then said that he was afraid I was probably right. He stated that the matter of race relations in the United States had gone out of hand. He feared that for purely demagogic reasons, some people, even in his own party, had gone too far and had aroused emotions which have become too deep to control. He also feared, he went on, that violence might break out and that the whole nation might be heading for very difficult times, without the Negro problem advancing one inch. Then the President inquired, "How was the situation in Angola?" I described the changes and stressed how much improved it was.

The President asked why we did not follow the line of the rest of the NATO members in regard to Africa. I explained why we could not, and also why we could not make a declaration of intentions as required by the United Nations. And besides we were within our rights, our legitimate rights. "So you won't?" Mr. Kennedy asked smilingly. "You want all the others to adopt your position?" I said I did. At this point the secretary entered the room with a message on a bit of paper, and I left.

Again, I met President Kennedy on November 7, 1963. It was our longest meeting, nearly one hour and a half. I found the President much better briefed on Portuguese affairs than before. It was clear that in the meantime he had become very interested in Portuguese-American relations. I noticed on his desk a very thick file, which I suspected to be the file sent over by the State Department for the President's information. I was right. In the course of our conversation the President consulted it twice and finally placed it on the floor near his rocking chair. The President also sent for a copy of the Herald Tribune to read out to me one item on Communist infiltration in Africa and asked what I thought about it. The President was treating me in a most intimate and friendly mood, and I felt I had won his confidence and trust.

I spoke about Africa at some length, and then I described the talks I just had had with African delegations at the United Nations. I said that it was very easy to talk to an African delegate when he was alone; then he was understanding

and inclined to reach agreement. But when the African delegates got together, then they became difficult and almost impossible to deal with. The President interrupted me to say that United States senators were even worse. When he saw them individually, they were very pleasant and understanding and promised to support his legislative program; but when assembled, then the senators broke their promises, and went back on their word, and in fact, raised all sorts of problems. It was impossible to get along with the Senate, the President concluded.

Then we discussed the United Nations for a while, and the forthcoming Security Council Meeting on Portuguese Africa. The President informed me that the United States would oppose any sanctions against Portugal, but at the same time notified me that he would not oppose a condemnation of Portugal. I observed that, of course, we would not be pleased with the American attitude. Then I invited the President's attention to the great harm which the United States was doing to Portuguese interests and also to Portuguese-American relations. The President said that he had to admit that when, back in 1961, he had taken the decision to instruct [Adlai E.] Stevenson to vote against Portugal in the Security Council, he had not realized how complex and far-reaching the problems were. He realized it now. He would see what he could do, but I should not ask him, after he had gone to the top of the mountain, to go down to the valley again in less than two years. But after that, it might be different. I asked smiling, "Mr. President, can't you do it and change the United States' attitude in one year?" The President mentioned the future election and indicated that before the next Presidential election was out of the way, there was very little he could do because of internal political considerations. By then we were both playing with one of the President's dogs which had come into the office. Both the President and myself were petting the dog while talking. The President would throw away small balls of paper to the dog to catch and to carry back. The President was gay, in high spirits, full of life. Fifteen days later he was assassinated in a most violent and barbarous way. I was the last Foreign Minister to see him in his office.

Personally, I was very shocked with the death rite. President John F. Kennedy was a man of charm, and he had an engaging personality. Being thin and frail, he had something feminine about him which made a striking contrast with the greatness and the power of his country. I never felt President

Kennedy was selfless or idealistic or guided by lofty principles. I never felt President Kennedy really cared much about what was right or wrong. He had personal ambitions and obviously enjoyed political power. I always felt he was a very devoted and patriotic American, the furtherance and expansion of United States interests being his overriding consideration. To this effect he would discard principles and rely on power, and he would use American power with ruthlessness if necessary. When he became President, he was a man with little experience or knowledge, but he seemed to me to be gaining both very fast, and he was clearly becoming the real leader and imposing an ever stronger authority on his collaborators. I am sure his second term of office would have been quite different from the first.

O'CONNOR: Thank you very much for the statement.