

John M. Steeves Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 6/17/1970
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Biographical Note

John M. Steeves (1905 - 1998) was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (1959-1962); the Ambassador to Afghanistan (1962-1966); and the Director General of the Foreign Service (1966-1969). This interview focuses on Steeves' relationship with John F. Kennedy (JFK), Steeves' role as ambassador of Afghanistan, and foreign relations between the United States and Afghanistan, among other issues.

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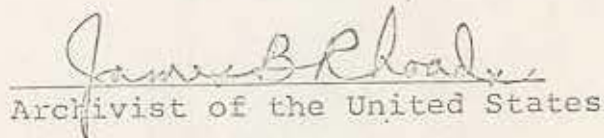
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John M. Steeves

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John M. Steeves—JFK #2
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Second Oral History Interview

with

JOHN M. STEEVES

June 14, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: I think one thing that might be well worth going into today is the role you played on the Laos task force in February of 1961 and some of the recommendations that came out from that task force. First of all, this was a departure from the way things were done in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration, wasn't it, the use of the task force? Did you encounter any difficulties because of the....

STEEVES: Yes, the task force idea was essentially a Kennedy invention. The President felt that the usual machinery within the departments was a little bit slow to react in times of crisis, and he therefore turned to the task force technique. I can't quite remember in what sequence all of this took place, but this is what gave birth to the crisis center in the Department of State. We actually created, physically, over there a room with the necessary facilities, communication-wise, map facilities, which was pretty much comparable to a war room. And we had a staff on hand twenty-four hours a day that monitored all the incoming and outgoing messages on the particular crisis they were handling, whether it was Cuba or Laos or whatever it was. And at least once a day the task force, which was essentially representatives from the various agencies, heavily larded with people in the Department with responsibility that sat on that task force....

O'BRIEN: I have a list of White House appointments, and I suspect that one meeting on the ninth had representatives of the task force as well as others

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that were included. Is there anything in particular that stands out in mind about that task force, the way that it functioned? For example, is there any real conflict between the various agencies represented with the decision to go for a policy of neutralization in Laos?

STEEVES: Yes, the policy of the neutralization of Laos was not a doctrine that was widely espoused by the policy makers in Washington at that particular time. It was not one that I personally espoused. And being very deeply involved in it myself, I naturally remember that viewpoint of it a little bit better than I do some of the others.

There was a feeling among most of us that had policy responsibility in the old FE at that time that, as inconvenient as it was, Laos would not be a place that anybody would choose to fight a war, but that this was the arena that the Soviets had chosen or the communists had chosen, and for that reason that was where it would have to be met, and met in some manner that would presumably maintain the integrity of Laos. Thus, there was all of the action attempting to get a government in Laos that would stand up to the Pathet-Lao, with the backing of the king, with bolstering from us, that would maintain Laos' integrity. The drive for neutrality in the whole doctrine of neutralizing Laos was something that came to the fore and was actually agreed upon -- and then how to achieve it and all the rest of it -- in the Geneva Conference and was not talked up very much back there.

I can tell you one thing that I remember that serves to remind me that that was true. We had one voice in the Department that came forth with the idea of the neutral belt. George McGhee was the author of that particular thesis, and it did not find any acceptance anywhere because it was impractical.

O'BRIEN: Now, is this the neutral nations commission idea?

STEEVES: Yeah, essentially.

O'BRIEN: Essentially. No support at all?

STEEVES: No. This never really was accepted as a serious suggestion. Not that we might not have thought better of it if we had thought that it was a practical solution, but to agree to our pulling out of an area in order to do our part towards the neutrality, we always assumed that the communists would not honor it.

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Therefore, all it was doing was creating a vacuum for them to walk into.

O'BRIEN: That's the basic resistance.

STEEVES: Yes. And it would have had to involve the Thais, who were dead set against it. The South Vietnamese were not for it. The Cambodians rather early espoused the idea.

O'BRIEN: Well, as the Laotian situation developed, was the problem of infiltration along the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail, at that time, was that of major concern at this stage in the thinking of these people involved in Laos? Or is this something that comes along later?

STEEVES: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and all of the discussion around that particular phenomenon comes to the fore much later in the story because infiltration into Laos was direct and right into the Plaine des Jarres. It involves the confrontation with the Meo tribesmen that were around that area. It involves the whole story of the communists not holding to the agreement they made in 1954 that they would confine their active existence in Laos to the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly.

O'BRIEN: What is the role of the Thais in the thinking of those of you who were on the task force? Is the disillusionment with the Thais and U.S. willingness to go into Southeast Asia...

STEEVES: The Thais from the very beginning were very, very chary of anything that seemed to lead towards neutralization of Laos or making any accommodation for a coalition government in Laos. They were dead set against Prince Souvanna Phouma during the period when he thought that he could gain the cooperation of the Pathet Lao and his half-brother, Souphanouvong. The Thais much preferred people like Phoui Sananikone. They were actively in backing of General Phoumi. Phoumi was a relative of Sarit, which gave him an additional kind of family relationship that always spelled backing for the right-wingers.

Within our own camp, of course, there was a very strong backing through the Agency for Phoumi and what he stood for, which was essentially a right wing militarist opposition to the communists. Whereas those of us that were certainly anticommunists and wanted to put a stop to that were never sure how strong or how able or how honest even, the fellows were

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that we had working for us.

My feeling was that Phoui was the answer to everything. [Laughter] Phoui Sananikone. He was an honest Lao national. I think even to this day that if we could have somehow or other gotten the government around him, that he is the person who was honest enough, able enough, enough of a nationalist, had the confidence of the king -- that he could have come forth with the type of government that we could have supported and that the

country could have united behind. But it never came to pass. Of course, Souvanna PHouma -- when he was then working with the Pathet Lao because he was so much against Phoumi -- also undercut Phoui.

O'BRIEN: Last time we got into the question of Averell Harriman and Averell Harriman's instructions and also some of your disagreements with him over the letter of those instructions. Now, as I understand it, you have a group here in Washington, as I understand, headed by Ken Young, that's milling out some policy papers and...

STEEVES: Back at that time?

O'BRIEN: Yes. Is that correct?

STEEVES: No, Ken Young was not in on that then.

O'BRIEN: He was Ambassador to Thailand, I know.

STEEVES: Yes, but he was already in Thailand. No, the people who were doing the backstopping of us in Geneva were Walter McConaughy, who was the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and Barney Koren [Henry T. Barney Koren] Ambassador Kroen, who was in Southeast Asian Affairs, Bob Cleveland [Robert G. Cleveland], and men of that type were the ones that were in the Bureau and doing the backstopping for us over there. Bill Sullivan, of course, was until I asked him to come over to be my right-hand man and deputy while I was deputy to Averell Harriman.

O'BRIEN: Well, now is there any evidence that some of the paperwork that is benign done here, in terms of position papers circulating in the White House, is Harriman paying attention to these? Does it make a great deal of difference in this whole operation?

STEEVES: Harriman essentially did not. I've forgotten whether I told you in our previous interview, but Harriman finally told me that it didn't make any difference what the Secretary of State said, didn't make any difference

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what papers the Far East Bureau cranked out, the President had told him that we must have an agreement no matter what you have to agree to to get us out of this mess in Laos. And this was somewhat surprising to me that the decisions were not being made by the regular machinery that was established to do it and that Harriman seemed to have other instructions than those that were coming out of the regular structure in the Department putting out for these things.

O'BRIEN: Well, this sets up the basis, now, for the conflict in Geneva, doesn't it...

STEEVES: It does...

O'BRIEN: ...between yourself and, I imagine, Sisco as well and Harriman, doesn't it?

STEEVES: Sisco's part in it, of course, came along as the expert in dealing in multi-national conferences because of his experience in the U.N. He was there for only a very short time. He was an extremely able counselor, awfully good in figuring out the agenda for conferences, the getting of papers together, the handling of procedural matters having to do with the conference. He was only there a very short time and very rapidly came back to Washington.

O'BRIEN: Well, as I understand it, Harriman felt that he was overstaffed, too many people, you know, serving as staff people. How did you react to that?

STEEVES: Yes, everybody had their interests. We had a group of people from the Pentagon, and Harriman not only disliked having this group around, but thought they were pretty worthless and disliked intensely the people that were involved in it. The two people that I remember that he especially objected to were Haydn Williams, who is now the head of the Asia Foundation.... He once upon a time told me, "You get that guy Haydn out of my hair and keep him out of this office. I don't want to see him anymore. And the other one was Colonel McCrae, Bill McCrae, who I had known and worked with in Honolulu. He was a good staffman, a good internationalist, so far as Army colonels go. But he also became very disillusioned with Harriman, and they never got along. So the facts of the case are they were very seldom brought in on the conference.

On the other hand, I must say to Harriman's credit that people like Cooper, who was the representative of the Agency, worked very closely with Harriman to this very day.

O'BRIEN: That's one thing I'm curious about in regards to Harriman. Harriman has this reputation of being extremely patient in negotiations and extremely

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volatile with the people he works with. How do you look at it?

STEEVES: Well, Harriman is a complex fellow. You can't help but admire some of the things about Harriman. Here is a man with all of the wealth in the world, has no need to get himself involved in all of the claptrap of government, the headaches that go with it and everything else; and yet, because of his personal interest, dedication, and involvement in these things, this very rich man -- sometimes not always in too good health, living in inconvenient places, traveling about the world, and all the rest of it -- insists on keeping himself involve. The reward that he gets out

of it, I think, is that he's a man of tremendous personal ego, and he likes to be in the limelight. If you want Harriman to feel really bad, overlook him in something that he feels he ought to be involved in.

For example, he was furious when he saw the list of people that were going with President Kennedy to the Vienna conference with Khrushchev and he was not even advised that the meeting was taking place. What was worse, he was not going to be one of the participants, you see. Tommy Thompson and Chip Bohlen were going over there. "Why, they were boys in the backroom when I was dealing with Stalin." He said, "To think that the President would not call upon me for my advice." So this is the type of thing that is the driving force as far as Harriman is concerned.

And then Harriman is a complete, utter political animal. And not only is he a political animal, but he is an absolutely dedicated, doctrinaire party Democrat. There's nothing that the Republicans do that deserves recognition; there's nothing that the Democrats ever do that's wrong. [Laughter] He is quite willing to play that to the nth degree. And I think that this is what gets him in what I think is really an infamous role and one of the less lovely sides of his character.

For instance, the thing that he's doing at the present time I think it's just almost unforgivable for a man to have taken the responsibility of being the chief negotiator with the North Vietnamese and carrying out the instructions that he must have had from President Johnson, feeling as he did, and from Secretary Rusk, feeling as he did, and being his country's representative, and now turning around and saying that the only reason that we don't have any agreement over there is that we have undercut the North Vietnamese. It's just almost that silly.

O'BRIEN: Well, I understand -- at least a lot of people that know Harriman say that he's completely overawed by the position of the Presidency and the role of the

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President. Not so much a President, but just the Presidency. Do you ever see any -- get any reflections of this at all?

STEEVES: Yes, I did. Harriman does have an attitude towards the Presidency, but that has a tendency to be colored a bit by his attitude towards the man who happens to be President. His great hero was Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. He's always quoting Roosevelt and what great principles Roosevelt enunciated and the things that he stood for. Kennedy was a Democrat and therefore had somewhat of the same loyalty and the same attitude from Harriman, but not all together, because he felt himself a senior to Kennedy and was resentful, as I said, about the Vienna conference, the fact that he was not always consulted by the President. I doubt very much if his awe of the Presidency carries over to the present scene because he doesn't think much of the current President.

O'BRIEN: Well, was there anything else that he took off on and became particularly upset with President Kennedy about that you recall?

STEEVES: No. I think that you would have to say in general that his attitude towards the President was characterized by great loyalty and a feeling of admiration for the young President.

O'BRIEN: Well, he takes a liking to your deputy, at that point, Bill Sullivan, doesn't he?

STEEVES: Yes.

O'BRIEN: What explains this? How did Sullivan manage this?

STEEVES: Very easy. Bill Sullivan is probably one of the brightest minds that we've got in the Foreign Service. I would say that Bill Sullivan is among six or so of the brightest, facile minded chaps I've ever had to work with in the Foreign Service. Bill Sullivan came over to be my right-hand staff man because he was our staff assistant in FE. Since I knew how good he was, how rapidly he could write, how good he is at paperwork and figuring out how to handle things, I got him to come over to Geneva. It wasn't very long until Harriman discovered what I had long known about Bill Sullivan, that he had this great ability. I certainly never stood in the way of Bill Sullivan working directly with the Governor when he wanted to. And despite the fact that Bill didn't have a very high regard for some of the principles

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for which Harriman was working, nevertheless, he took the attitude of a young subordinate, that you did what the Governor wanted, that you wrote what he asked you for, and you helped him achieve his purposes and very seldom disagreed with him. And this brought Bill into the role, after I left, of being the young, mental giant that wrote the papers, that produced the positions, and that did the bidding of the Governor to produce the type of things that he wanted.

Bill changed his attitude completely so far as his basic convictions on the Laos business was concerned. Bill, for instance, about the first day that he was over there, listening to Harriman talk in our staff meetings, coined the expression that the slogan for the Laos conference ought to be "Cave with Ave." But you found that same Sullivan later on, when he was alone and carrying on in Geneva, delivering the lecture that has lived to haunt him, in which he said, "This great thing that we have wrought in bringing about an agreed neutral position so far as Laos is concerned may well become the template upon which we can forge agreements around the world and usher in the peace that we look for," a bunch of rot like that. I've never embarrassed Bill by asking him if he's ever dug that speech out and looked at it -- since he has now become Ambassador to Laos and went back to fact that and now is in

charge of the Vietnam task force over here again -- and what he thinks about some of the things that he said in Geneva during that period.

O'BRIEN: Well, in that regard, does it hurt a person like Sullivan to become too closely associated with Harriman, when Harriman, let's say, departs?

STEEVES: It hasn't because of Harriman's elevation of Sullivan after he came back from Geneva when Harriman became Under Secretary, Sullivan went up to work directly for him. This resulted in Sullivan's very rapid promotion. Because the Democratic Administration was still in office and Harriman had terrific influence, it resulted in Sullivan being appointed as the Ambassador to Laos, one of the youngest ambassadors we've ever appointed anywhere. And you must say to Sullivan's credit that once he is on the job and has the responsibility that he performs in a pretty credible manner. Facing a different situation and seeing the situation as it was when he got into the responsible seat in Laos, he was about as tough an anti-Pathet Lao and as tough a hardliner as anybody we'd ever had out there. What his details duties are today, I don't know.

O'BRIEN: Well, one other thing in this regard, do you recall how and just about when the decision was made to go

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with Souvanna Phouma rather than Phoumi?

STEEVES: It never was made. The acceptance of Souvanna Phouma never came into being as far as the United States was concerned until the Geneva Conference agreed that this was the only way we could have a so-called neutral Laos. With the three elements represented, then Souvanna Phouma was the only fellow that could do it. The Russians said this is the man we will accept. The Chinese said this is the man we will accept. The Pathet Lao felt the same way. The Thais never did change their mind; they were always sure that he would turn out to be a softie. But the United States accepted him. And that's the reason that he went back then as the Prime Minister and where we took over Souvanna Phouma.

O'BRIEN: So it's really about 1962, around the time of the agreements for the...

STEEVES: Yes, that's right. Mind you, there were other people before this that felt that we might better go along with SOuvanna Phouma and buy his formula. Among those, one of the men, who is still in the Department that always felt that was Ambassador Win Brown. Win Brown was always a rather strong supporter of Sourvanna Phouma, but he never got official endorsement of that back here.

O'BRIEN: Just a few moments ago we were looking over this list of White House appointments. I thought perhaps in regard to the ones that deal primarily

with Laos up until the time that you do become Ambassador to Afghanistan -- is there anything that stands out to memory about any of those meetings with the President, perhaps some of the things that the President might have been interested in or incidents that happened in any of these meetings? I know it's a long time ago. I don't think any of us could ever expect you to recall...

STEEVES: Looking over the list here and looking at the meeting on the *Honey Fitz*, I recall a very interesting humorous incident. When Harold MacMillan was being briefed on Southeast Asia, I happened to be the person who was doing it. The ward room on the *Honey Fitz* is very small, and there were so many of us in there that we couldn't all sit around the table and be properly served by the steward. And so I discovered that I was standing between the table and the servers. So I was serving the drinks and the sandwiches to people at the same time I was briefing them on Southeast Asia. And Harold MacMillan said, "Well, this is

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the first time I've ever received a political briefing from a butler." Other meetings.... No....

O'BRIEN: How about the Sukarno visit? Was there any particular problem that came up for you as a result of that?

STEEVES: No, this was a period when we were attempting to stay warm to Sukarno and keep him somewhere in our camp. On this particular visit, President Kennedy personally gave him a present of a helicopter exactly like the one that he was using himself for communications. There was always great suspicion about Sukarno and a dislike for some of the things he was doing, especially his own personal habits, licentious way of doing things, but we tried to treat with him in order to keep him from going too far into the camp of the communists and becoming completely under their influence, which, of course, he eventually did.

O'BRIEN: Passing over to your appointment as Ambassador to Afghanistan, how does this come about? You go back after being in Geneva and then...

STEEVES: Well, part of it was normal rotation and that type of development that takes place in the Department. With the Kennedy Administration coming in, Chester Bowles was the Under Secretary of State. Jeff Parsons, my senior, the Assistant Secretary of State, was sent as Ambassador to Sweden. Walter McConaughy was called back. I went to Geneva during the interim. And when I came back, I assumed because I had been there nearly three years that I was due for a field assignment and possibly an ambassadorship.

Chester Bowles was given rather *carte blanche* authority in the appointments field. I had several interviews with Chester Bowles. Despite the fact that Chester Bowles and I do not think exactly alike on a lot of things, we are very close friends. We have become closer

friends, in the years since, than we were back then; we barely knew each other. But I discovered that because of my habits of straightforward talking and thinking he was somewhat impressed. Chester Bowles is a very generous-minded man when it comes to that. And I discovered later that he said that I must have my ambassadorship.

The first offer that I had was to go to Khartoum in the Sudan. And it turned out that that could not come about because the medical facilities there were not good enough for my wife. And then the suggestion arose of my going to Pakistan as the Ambassador to Pakistan. And about the same time

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the decision was made that Walter McConaughy was going to be moved out of the Department again, too, and they were placing both of us overseas so Walter was given Pakistan and they asked me if I would go to Afghanistan, and I said, "Gladly so." So that's the way my assignment to Afghanistan came about.

President Kennedy, when he was talking to me about that time and telling me of the importance of having people that he had a high regard for and could trust in some of these more difficult spots, said, "You know, it doesn't make an awful lot of difference who I have at the Court of St. James because we talk on the telephone practically everyday, and their leaders come over here and we go over there, and there's all kinds of staff on whom we can lean." "But," he said, "it does make a great deal of difference whom we send to some of these smaller countries where we don't have all of these side facilities." I think he honestly meant it.

Through my years in Afghanistan -- I'd known the President before, but through that experience every time I came home I always saw the President. He was very interested in Afghanistan. He knew an awful lot about it. And then, of course, with the visit of the king and queen, he became more interested in it -- he was extremely effective during that particular visit and became quite a close personal friend of mine through that assignment to Afghanistan. He took a great personal interest in carrying out some of the policies that I recommended to him personally, despite the fact that there was some doubt about it in other areas of the Department and, in fact, in the White House itself.

O'BRIEN: Well, I'd like to come back to those in a moment. When you go there, do you have any instructions about bringing the conflict with Pakistan...

STEEVES: Yes. This was, of course, the great issue upon which we had to work and work hard. We were friends with the Afghans: we were friends with the Paks: and this was a very exacerbating situation. We wanted it resolved; we wanted it resolved soon because we knew that a closed border gave the Russians much more of an opportunity to do their meddling in Afghanistan than they otherwise would and if this deteriorated into a long-term fuse between the Afghans and the Pakistanis, it would certainly not serve our particular purposes in the area. So I did have instructions to work on that and work on it very hard, which I did, and we eventually did solve it.

O'BRIEN: Well, how did you handle this problem with the Afghans when they feel that this autonomous state should be created from what is Pakistan?

STEEVES: Well, what could you tell them? The best thing that we could ever do with the Afghans on that particular issue, because it was so emotional, was to get them to somehow or other shove it on the back burner...

O'BRIEN: How?

STEEVES: ...and to recognize that, of course, they had their plans, and that there were emotional reasons which we could understand, and that one of the carryovers of the colonial period were borders that were placed in places that now were recognized as not too convenient, but that they ought to somehow or other find a modus vivendi, despite this particular difference. And it was arguing along the line of the economic benefits that could come from cooperation rather than confrontation; that they were cutting themselves off from the supply lines; that they were putting themselves in a position where the Russians could exploit their position at will. We used to talk very frankly with the Afghans about that.

We finally persuaded them to arrive at a formula that they could accept without losing too much face. And the way that it was done was to get the Iranians and the Shah of Iran to carry the ball and to be the go-between rather than us, because, being who we were, and obviously looked upon with suspicion by the Russians, anything that we might suggest would have been turned down on the face of it. The Iranians carried the weight of this particular go-between responsibility, and eventually got them to come to a conference in Tehran. And that is quite a long, interesting story which I can't burden the record with, but it eventually solved it.

O'BRIEN: Well, in looking at some of the patterns of economic aid that's been given by not only AID [Agency for International Development] but also by the International Lending Committee, World Bank, there's a good deal of road building that goes on and grants for road building in Iran and Afghanistan in those years. Is this a part of it?

STEEVES: Oh, yes. We roughly divided the building of the road responsibility between ourselves and the Russians. And we developed a very cordial relationship with the Russians over this. We even had the unusual experience of the Russians walking in to our AID office one day and saying, "We've been looking at the maps with respect to our road that comes down from Herat and yours that goes from Kabul and where they meeting in Kandahar,

and we discover that they're a kilometer apart. Who's going to build that kilometer?" We said, "Well, our equipment is far up the other way and your equipment is down there. Why don't you build it?" And so they said, "Fine, okay, we will." And the old ambassador who became a very good friend of mine, Antonov [Sergei Antonov], he used to say, "Well, when we get these roads built for the Afghans, I'll tell you what we'll do." "We'll take a ZIS and a Cadillac. We'll ride half the way in a ZIS and half the time in the Cadillac. You and I will ride in the back seat with a bottle of bourbon and a bottle of vodka." [Laughter]

O'BRIEN: Well, the Russians never seemed to get too excited about U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

STEEVES: They didn't get excited because we didn't get excited. Someday somebody ought to write a detailed case story of the successful neutral, which was Afghanistan. There were certain aspects of Afghanistan that made possible there what is not possible anywhere else. One of the great assets of Afghanistan is its worthlessness. As land, it really is not worthy anything. And once the Russians were convinced that we had no designs upon Afghanistan, and we were pretty much convinced that the Russians also were really not terribly interested in military roads or the occupation of Afghanistan -- and if they were, we certainly didn't want to get into any military confrontation in stopping them -- we arrived at a modus vivendi that was really quite exemplary. Our economists sat down together on the same panels. We had advisors in the same offices. We conferred back and forth on mutual problems we had with the Afghans and their inability to figure out their financing or their bookkeeping or their procedures and dealt with them about as cordially as we would with any other country that might be working.... I had almost as much to do with the Russians, so far as talking about aid to Afghanistan, as I did with the third greatest donor to Afghanistan, the Germans.

O'BRIEN: Well, what happens to the aid programs that are ongoing and present when that break in diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan takes place?

STEEVES: Well, this, of course, was a terrible experience because it not only put a block in the road of future aid coming in in terms of materials -- because it couldn't get it across the border -- but when they slammed the door shut, it caught material on both sides of the border that had

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to be fitted together before it could possibly be used. For instance, there were three hundred and fifty trucks, the parts of which had already got into Afghanistan and the chassises and the wheels and everything of that part of the trucks were down in Pakistan. We had seven thousand tons of wheat that were stacked up in Peshawar that couldn't be moved. There were thousands of barrels of Iranian asphalt for the roads that were stuck in Karachi. And you can imagine the hostility which congressmen and people back here, who had no sympathy for the

irrational attitude of the Afghans, had about this for them to pay the added expense to lift that stuff out of Pakistan, take it back to the Persian Gulf of Kermanshah and then drag it over the desert all the way into Afghanistan over the Persian border was not a very popular idea.

O'BRIEN: I understand that there is at least some offer on the part of the Russians to bring some of that stuff in, or at least, the thinking that it could be brought in through...

STEEVES: No, no, no. The only place that the Russians got into saving the Afghans in those areas -- Afghan products that used to be sold in Pakistan, like the grape harvest, the Russians agreed to buy. They bailed them out. The things that the Afghans were buying in the European market, the Russians helped them get it into Afghanistan through a very circuitous route: all the way up through Russia and down of the Oxus and into Afghanistan. But these were relatively small quantities. The alternate route that began to be accepted, over which many negotiations took place with the Iranians to cut rates, facilitate the travel up, was, of course, through Beirut and across Syria and across Iran and in that way. That's the way, in fact, that we brought in our supplies. Great big forty ton trucks that we hired in Beirut and trucked it all the way across Iraq and into Afghanistan. Even our own food supplies were brought into largely that way.

O'BRIEN: Well, in regard to some of the governmental changes that take place there, like the change in government in '63 and the constitution in '64, are you just simply a disinterested bystander in most of this? Are you offering any advice or technical assistance?

STEEVES: Yes and no. These kind of things have to be handled

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with the utmost delicacy. But my guess is that the rather subtle but influential things that I may have said to the king and some of the other influential leaders of the country made them realize that the policies of a person like Daud [Mohammed Daud Kan], who was the hard-liner on Pakistan, who saw no danger in flirting with Russia, began to make the king and some of the others see that this type of thing was not paying off so far as the future of Afghanistan was concerned. Now no individual or no group of individuals can lay claim for bringing about the change, but I think that the fact that I succeeded in getting the king recognized as the good ruler which he was, and in giving him the world recognition which he received from his visit to the United States, gave him the necessary courage to do what he had pretty much become convinced that he would have to do one day anyway, and that was to take the initiative in changing the form of government in Afghanistan. And here you have an example of where the revolution in Afghanistan took place in an orderly way from the top. The king himself took the initiative in asking for the constitutional commission to be gathered together to write a constitution, the object of which

was to turn Afghanistan into a constitutional monarchy and to throw out his own cousin, as the hard-boiled dictator and turn it over to a different government.

O'BRIEN: Well, there is the separation of powers in that constitution -- a lot of things that were very Western.

STEEVES: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Do you offer, or is there anyone in the embassy that's offering just simply any kind of legal assistance?

STEEVES: Yes, we provided them with a lot of literature. We naturally had a number of people that were pretty good on administration that were in the various aid groups that helped a good bit. The Afghans were a little bit chary about being bold enough to call in an American constitutional adviser. They did a very cute thing. They looked around until they found a Frenchman that had this legal training at Columbia University and had worked with the Americans a good bit in Morocco on the Moroccan constitution and invited him in. So they had American advice through a French voice.

O'BRIEN: The name of the Prime Minister, the new Prime Minister,

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escapes me, the guy who apparently had some training in physics.

STEEVES: Oh, you mean Yusuf [Mohammed Yusuf], Prime Minister Yusuf.

O'BRIEN: He and the cabinet represent a rather highly trained group of people, don't they?

STEEVES: Yes, because he was the head of the bureau of mines. He was a trained engineer, had taken his training in Germany, spoke German fluently, spoke a little English, too. But this was called the government of the technicians because he was a technician himself, had no connection with the royal family, and appointed a cabinet that was largely a group of technical people. But he was not an unmixed blessing so far as the United States was concerned. Yusuf, also, was very pro-Russian without in any way being pro-communist. Then, of course, he became ill and he suffered a lot. He had very bad difficulty with his asthma.

O'BRIEN: Well, is that council a pretty able group in determining the resources and the projects and some of the aid...

STEEVES: They made some rather good beginnings but the end, I'm afraid, has been

the story in Afghanistan not only then, but ever since, they never quite muster the degree of ability, managerial ability, that is required in order to correct some of the ills of the country. And I'm afraid if you went over there today, you'd discover exactly the same situation.

O'BRIEN: Passing over to an American program, the Peace Corps, what are your reflections on that? Was it a success in the time that you were there?

STEEVES: Yes, indeed it was. I have said and still think that the story of the Peace Corps in Afghanistan must be one of the great success stories of the entire Peace Corps. We had a very difficult time persuading the Afghans to accept the Peace Corps at all. And they finally said, "Well, okay, we'll try a few. What about nine?" Why nine, I don't know. And when I told Sargent Shriver

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that the Afghans were going to open the door for nine Peace Corps people, he said, "Oh, tell them not to bother. We can't possibly run a program with nine people." I persuaded him to use these nine as the opening wedge. And those nine were nine of the finest youngsters that I have ever seen in that type of role. One or two of them were teachers; one or two were nurses; one was a grease monkey. And those nine youngsters really made a name for themselves. To make a long story short, it went from there until we really had to beat the Afghans off from asking for thousands of them. At one time, they put in a request, a detailed request, which would have added up to eight hundred in the country at once, which of course, we simply couldn't meet. It never grew beyond two hundred and fifty.

O'BRIEN: You had a very able guy by the name of [Inaudible].

STEEVES: No, no, no. That was in another area. The man that was the very able head of the Peace Corps, without whom I still have very close relations here in town and have a very high regard for, is Robert Steiner. Robert Steiner was a Persian-speaking scholar, a very practical minded person, understood the fine points of how to get the best out of the Peace Corps and still not have them at variance with the embassy. He and I worked very closely together. I used to have Bob Steiner on my country team committee and I used him as an adviser on many things in addition to his work in the Peace Corps.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the time you're there, the suggestion comes up -- and I'm not quite sure where it comes from and what your relationship is with it -- this idea of a federation between Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.

STEEVES: It didn't come from me at all. I can't claim any credit for that whatsoever. It was a far out idea that we thought had merit, certainly so far as an

economic union or under some kind of a convention. The problems that Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have in common are so many that it argued strongly for closer collaboration. One of the examples -- well, we knew that they were rather sympathetic toward this idea and might develop it some day. We used the argument with them, "Why sure, this is the way that you could really make sense out of your airlines. What's the sense of all three of you going to all the expense and overhead of running

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your own airlines when you could run something like the SAS [Scandinavian Airlines System, Inc.] And then there's irrigation, there's the exploitation of your mining. Afghanistan has great deposits of iron ore but not large enough population to consume the output of it. And Pakistan has the refineries. You could ship down there." There were all kinds of ways that they could have cooperated.

The Afghans were largely in favor of it, I think, from the standpoint that they did not want to be in an international organization that had anti-Soviet connotations like CENTO [Central Treaty Organization] or SEATO [Southeast Atlantic Treaty Organization], but they did not want to be associated with an innocuous group that they could talk over mutual problems with without feeling so alone in the face of the Soviets all the time. It's true that Iran's and Pakistan's membership in CENTO was always a block. I don't think that they ever will go any farther with that idea until CENTO is a thing of the past. Then they might talk about it again.

O'BRIEN: I'm about ready to run out of tape.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

O'BRIEN: Well, I understand that - particularly late 1962, 1963 -- you began to get some insights into some real differences between the Chinese and Russians. Do you recall anything specific about this?

STEEVES: Well, there never was very much of a veil over this feeling so far as the Russians were concerned. They had very little to do with the Chinese mission. And when the anti-Russian comments begin to come out of Peking, at any given time, the Russians were never loathe at all to comment on it. I said to Antonov one day as a pleasant aside, "Well, I see your friends, the Chinese, are handing you compliments again today." And he said back through his interpreter the equivalent of, "We always thought they were bastards, and now we know it." [Laughter] Of course, he had served in China so he knew that very well.

Yes, even at public functions you'd discover that they never had more than nodding recognition of each other. They were very jealous of their position in Afghanistan. As I said before, I think they were reasonably well convinced that we had no ambitions in Afghanistan that would in any way conflict with their relatively

innocuous presence in Afghanistan. But they were not at all sure that the Chinese would maintain the same attitude. They were very worried about the Pakistan turn towards China later on.

O'BRIEN: Would you say this is a sort of constant thing? Or do you see it growing in intensity from the time you go over there in early 1963 through '64?

STEEVES: Oh, yes. It intensified a good deal because the Afghans went to China on invitation. In fact, the king went there. And despite the fact that they said they were not going to make any deals with the Chinese, they came back persuaded by the Chinese to accept a twenty-eight million dollar loan. This was almost openly frowned upon by the Russians. I was told by a source that the Russians contemplated penalizing the Afghans for that, to a degree, but they never did it.

O'BRIEN: In terms of intelligence, is Afghanistan a key listening post on the things like this or on internal matters in the Soviet Union?

STEEVES: Not really. About all that you could catch of an intelligence value in Afghanistan were unguarded comments by the communist diplomatic community because the atmosphere was so relaxed and because the Poles and the Bulgarians, Yugoslavians, especially, were such close social friends. They would tell you all kinds of things about the interrelationships in the Communist Bloc that you would never get in a place where the atmosphere was a little more charged. The best source of the newest funny stories on the communists largely came from the Poles, being somewhat humorous anyway. They could tell you more stories about funny things that were happening in the Soviet Union and their differences with them and all the rest of it.

There were always the alleged and sometimes carried through defections, which were nasty to handle because they were a great embarrassment to the Afghans, and frankly, sometimes, because of their worthlessness, were an embarrassment to us. Some of those things you'd rather not handle, but you never know, and you can't help it.

O'BRIEN: These were defections, basically, of...

STEEVES: Largely the Poles that were trying to use the rather open door of a place like Afghanistan, where they had an aid mission too. People would come on there on seeming innocuous engineer roles, things of that nature, and then when they got ready to go home, wouldn't go home. The Bulgarians the same way.

O'BRIEN: Well, the visit of the King and Queen of Afghanistan, here in 1963, how does this develop? Was this your suggestion?

STEEVES: Yes. I told you that I came back specifically in the early part of 1963 -- I guess I didn't say so, but I did come back in January of 1963 to have two issues settled, whatever else I talked about. One was that we either ought to tell the Afghans frankly that we would not subsidize their importation of American aid goods over an inconvenient route through Tehran because we were basically not in sympathy with the closing of the border, we couldn't explain it to our Congress, and we'd have nothing to do with it; or tell them that their political squabble with Pakistan was their business, and although we didn't like it, we would help them to a degree while they were working it out. This was a very difficult psychological thing to explain to the Congress back here. But I came back with the avowed purpose of telling the Department they either had to take one position or the other, so I could go back and tell the king and the prime minister that the United States is not going to be sympathetic to this nonsense, and we're going to cut off our AID, and we dislike it.

And the other thing was that for years we had had the royal visit from Afghanistan on a kind of tentative list. But it kept being pushed into the background by other more prominent visits. And it was being offensive to these proud Afghans. They're too proud to ask again. But they knew the invitation had been issued years before, the time was to be decided, and we'd never really bit that bullet. So I came back with the avowed purpose of getting a commitment one way or the other on the aid because of the closed border, and the other one was to firm up the visit of the king.

Secretary Rusk told me, so far as the visit was concerned, he said, "Don't bother working up a position paper over in the Department. You know the President very well. You're going over there to see him tomorrow and just ask him. If he wants to go through with it, we can work it in." And when I got over to the White House, there was something that interfered with my seeing him right

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away, but when he came in -- I can still see that marvelous, young President. He walked up, he put his arms around me, and he said, "Well," he said, "it doesn't look like those Afghans are treating you so badly over there." he said, "When are you bringing that king over here?" [Laughter] "Well," I said, "it just so happens that's what I was coming to talk to you about." Bob Komer and some other people in the office tried to turn him off it. And he finally turned to Komer, and he said, "Listen, Komer, you lost that argument long ago, forget it." Then I said, "Mr. President, it looks to me that the convenient time for us to do it is about the seventh of September so far as your calendar is concerned." So he said, "The seventh of September it will be." We set that in January, and that was the day the king arrived.

O'BRIEN: Well, now you mentioned that there were several things that you pushed and had resistance on. Are there others as well, positions that you pushed?

STEEVES: Largely within the aid area. The big issue was whether or not we were going to help the Afghans at that time said, "All right, I'll go along with

you to the extent of subsidizing the extra fare on the shipments that are now lying in Pakistan to the extent of a half a million dollars.”

O'BRIEN: Now, where is your resistance coming from? Let's take first of all the aid matter? Is it coming basically from AID...

STEEVES: Coming from the AID people and...

O'BRIEN: Gaud [William S. Gaud], at this point?

STEEVES: No, I'm sorry, noton Gaud. Gaud was on my side.

O'BRIEN: Gaud is on your side?

STEEVES: Gaud is always on my side. He had a very strong feeling that our small AID program, never amounting to more than forty-two million a year or something of that nature, in Afghanistan was well worthwhile. And although he used to have his fun with us, Gaud was essentially very sympathetic.

O'BRIEN: How about Komer?

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STEEVES: Komer not at all. Komer was dead set against it. I must say that people in NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs], other than those that worked specifically on the Afghan desk, were not terribly sympathetic.

O'BRIEN: How about Komer? Does Komer have a rather hard attitude towards Afghanistan in your contacts with Komer?

STEEVES: Komer used to play the tune that he thought was the most popular one at the time. And because he thought the winds were blowing in the direction of closer cooperation with Pakistan, he knew it would be pretty difficult to hold that type of an attitude and at the same time, seemingly, be lenient towards an obstreperous and difficult to understand country like Afghanistan. Komer was not, you know, among the loveliest characters I've ever known. A Machiavelli if there ever was one.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about resistance on the other matters we're talking about, the decision to put a little political pressure, you were talking about, on the Afghans to better things with the Paks? I suppose that was the motive, to better things with the Paks.

STEEVES: That's right. Well, that had the full agreement and backing from everybody

in the Department, from the Secretary on down, and certainly in the White House. I had the fullest backing and cooperation there in terms of thinking of arguments, of figuring out ways and means that could bring them to that decision.

O'BRIEN: Well, how does the visit go?

STEEVES: Extremely well. We got him into Williamsburg, stayed overnight, flew up here. We put on such a terrific program. Kennedy used the King of Afghanistan's visit to experiment with a new type of reception at the White House. It went off so well that it scared Washington half to death. They put on fireworks. The Air Force and Marine troop show had so much fireworks that they jammed the telephone system in town thinking the place was being blown up. [Laughter] But the President made a terrific impression on the king and queen and they on him. He liked them.

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We took him from here down to see some military demonstration; we took him to Fort Bragg and on down to what was then [Cape] Canaveral. We took him aboard the first stages of what later became one of the great Saturn shots. We took him out to California. Took him up to Wyoming. It ended up in Indiana because of Purdue University's interest in some aspects of Afghanistan. But it was a highly successful visit all the way through. The king was terribly pleased. Everybody played their parts extremely well. Such visits as his lunch and period with Adlai Stevenson in the United Nations in New York was really a conversation and meeting to remember. I had a long letter from Adlai Stevenson afterwards saying how much he was impressed by the king and how delighted he was to have been a part of it.

O'BRIEN: The king's a rather intelligent and liberal minded guy, isn't he?

STEEVES: He is. You have to break through a kind of humble facade because he's not an ostentatious person. The well-bred Afghan thinks that ostentation or making too much of a show is not the sign of a gentleman. They're pretty reserved. But he does have very democratic ideas. He is dedicated to good purposes and certainly is one reigning monarch that is more interested in constructive and good things than in being a playboy.

O'BRIEN: What's the response to the assassination of President Kennedy?

STEEVES: The nation practically went into mourning. I have never seen a country go through such a traumatic experience. As a matter of protocol, like we always do, I opened up the embassy with the book, condolence book to be signed, thinking that a representative or two from the palace and the government would come over, notify them as such. By 10:00, the line was six people deep and five blocks long. I opened up eight different books during the morning to try to take care of the crowd.

Everybody in the cabinet arrived. We had a memorial service at the residence to which all the cabinet came, plus the princes. Protocol didn't allow the king to come to anything of that nature, but the Crown Prince did. And they asked for the opportunity to voluntarily give their own eulogies.

I used to have people stop me in the street. People out in the villages would talk about it and weep. It was really an odd

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thing to fathom, how people in that isolated corenre of the world knew enough about a man to have that type of deep feeling. I can't explain it in any other way than somehow or other the spirit of the things that Kennedy stood for permeated an awful lot of this world, and he, therefore, became an institution or the personification or the epitome of a belief in some principles that people kind of clung to as a whole.

O'BRIEN: Is there any discernible shift that you can see or changes that takes place in the transition of administrations in policy or attitudes, interests towards Afghanistan.

STEEVES: No. I came back soon after that. You never could ever get close to Johnson like you did to Kennedy. If it wasn't political issues in Texas or back there, why, he didn't have anything to do with you. But it was not reflected in any policy attitude towards Afghanistan. After all, the situation had eased so much by that time, our relations were so cordial, that they were doing nothing to row about.

O'BRIEN: Just a managerial question or two -- if I may use that term managerial. I guess it's in now in the Department. [Laughter] Do you use the country team as a means of control and...

STEEVES: Constantly. I never allowed myself to reach the point where I was taking country team votes or anything of that nature; I realized that it's the ambassador's responsibility. But I certainly leaned on them heavily for advice and kept them fully informed at all times. I not only had a country team meeting every week, but I also had a aid meeting, which was a small group which was part of the country team, once a week in addition. That meant two times that we formally took it up. And I was constantly in association with the aid directory. I had three different AID directors when I was out there. I got along with all of them very well. I took detailed interest in myself in every aspect of it. There wasn't an AID project in the country that I don't think that I knew as well as the AID director himself.

O'BRIEN: So they keep you pretty informed as to what they're saying...

STEEVES: Never had any trouble.

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O'BRIEN: How about the Agency? They have any operations or is it...

STEEVES: Yes. But again, I made it patiently clear before I ever went out there, if I ever caught any people of the Agency going off on a tangent of which I did not have the privilege of knowing, they would go home on the next plane. I would not have any isolated operation of which I was not aware -- if I wanted to be. Now, many times an ambassador can choose not to know a name or to be somewhat ignorant of an operation or something of that nature, and that's his privilege. Most of the problems that people have had with the Agency are largely the fault of the ambassador himself because he does not take the responsibility and the prerogatives that are given to him.

O'BRIEN: What are the nature of the operations outside of the normal intelligence networks?

STEEVES: Oh, largely that...

O'BRIEN: Do they subsidize anybody?

STEEVES: ...in a place like Afghanistan. Not in an open way. They might help an individual by a scholarship or in getting some of his printing down during an election or something of that nature, but nothing more detrimental than that.

O'BRIEN: Is there any time that you have either friction or just times when you simply have problems of communication with the Afghan desk here with NEA? Any time that you get out of tune...

STEEVES: Our biggest problem was in terms of the AID section, back here in the Department, attempting by AID policies to run our policies toward Afghanistan. I got madder over that than almost anything. And this was always something that I used to just raise ned] about when I came back here. If it made political sense, our chief objectives in a place like Afghanistan were political. There were an awful lot of things we were doing that would never make economic sense anyhow, so why go through all the expense and all of the falderal in trying to kid ourselves into the fact that it did. And I used to get more annoyed with the waste of time and the waste of money in getting things that we had

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agreed upon going because some guy was nit-picking over some little, silly, insignificant think like the gear shift in a truck or the shape of the cab or something of that nature that didn't make a continental of a difference to the Afghans. But so far as my policy relationship

with the Department were concerned, other than things of that nature, I had none. Very good backstopping.

O'BRIEN: We've covered a number of things, and I'm sure we've left a lot out. Is there anything that comes to mind that you feel we have left out in an interview of this nature?

STEEVES: Well, it's chiefly around the Kennedy years so I wouldn't want to drag you into anything that's not of that particular period.

O'BRIEN: Yeah, but the thing is that the people who are going to use this are researchers that I'm sure will have a much broader interest than in the Kennedy years.

STEEVES: One thing that has a slight association with the Kennedy years that I carry in my mind to this very day is the deterioration of the concept of the career service.

O'BRIEN: Okay, fine, fine. I'd like to...

STEEVES: Kennedy walked into this -- and in many ways people give the period that Kennedy came into the White House as the beginning the erosion of elite core of the service concept. If I ever write anything in response to some of the things that are being said in the press and some of the studies that are being done at the present time, I would label it, "How to Kill a Gnat with a Computer." They are missing the point all together. If the United States is going to rely upon a competent core of people to handle the delicate business of our foreign relations or head it up or guide it, manage it, it has got to be on a very carefully run career basis. It cannot be done catch-as-catch-can. I say that so far as the officer is concerned, that he needs to have these ingredients: that the young people going in have to be very carefully chosen, whatever techniques you use. Examination, written or oral, college records, or what records you must be sure that you do the best job that you can in the selection so that you

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ge the cream of the American crop because it is the type of work that requires excellence of the first degree.

Secondly, he must be superbly trained. And that means not only on the job, not only in our own institute; it means exposure to the university, time out for sabbaticals. As times get more technical and the demands get greater, the responsibility gets great, the training must get greater.

Thirdly, if it is going to function as it should, it must be subject to very strict discipline. You can't run a world-wide operation if an individual can say, "I want to serve in

Paris in the political business but don't send me to Ouagadougou. The guys of a high esprit de corps and efficiency is that they must be a subject to very strict discipline.

And fourth, most important, is you cannot have a career service without out there being adequate rewards. And by the adequate rewards, I'm not talking primarily of wages. That is important, and we have done pretty well wage wise for the Foreign Service. Nobody is in these days, really, in terms of compensation. But every person that comes into a career business like the Foreign Service ought to have the gleam in the eye that he is going to become an ambassador or he's going to become an ambassador he is going to be heavily involved in the very delicate business of this country's foreign affairs.

If you set up some kind of an operation, either by example or by hortatory teaching, attempting to convince that fellow that he is not a special breed of cat, that he should not look forward to special treatment and special responsibility and a life-long career, he is not going to have the interest in it, he is not going to put his life into it in the way that he would have otherwise. How are you going to tell a fellow that he needs to know everything there is about his area studies in a special part of the world if he's not going to be in it ten years from now? How do you get a fellow to master some of these difficult languages if all he's going to look forward to is dropping out and going out as an associate professor in California.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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