James C. Thomson Jr. Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/29/1980
Administrative Information

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Interviewer: Sheldon Stern
Date of Interview: February 29, 1980
Place of Interview: Cambridge, Massachusetts
Length: 74 pages

Biographical Note
Thomson was a speech writer and assistant to Chester B. Bowles, and others at the U.S. Department of State (1961-1965), and later became an East Asian specialist at Harvard and a professor emeritus of history, journalism, and international relations at Boston University. In this interview, he discusses Chester Bowles' political style, the unconventional selections of ambassadorial positions, and the nation's role in the world, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation
James C. Thomson Jr., recorded interview by Sheldon Stern**,** Febraury 29, 1980, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

James C. Thomson Jr.

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James C. Thomson Jr.—JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

James C. Thomson, Jr.

February 29, 1980
Cambridge, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: I would like to begin with the period, when you were working for Chester Bowles [Chester B. Bowles], just at the time when Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] declared his candidacy for the presidency, which is in late 1959. Actually just before that, when Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] offered Chet Bowles the job of Kennedy's chief advisor on foreign policy. If you have any recollections of how that came about and what impact that had on your responsibilities or for Bowles?

THOMSON: Well, I'd known Bowles since I graduated from Yale in '53 and he was dismissed as Ambassador to India right after, three months after Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] taking office. And I'd kept in touch with him and finally being on the verge of either going into the foreign service or finishing out the PhD or

going into some form of Capitol Hill work and had opted for more or less finishing the PhD and doing Bowles sort of piecemeal, which meant that I had worked in his unsuccessful…. I had worked for him in '56 when he was Stevenson's [Adlai E. Stevenson] foreign policy advisor for a few months and I worked for him in '58 when he tried to win the Senate nomination in Connecticut and Tom Dodd [Thomas J. Dodd] got it instead and finally I had joined him briefly in the autumn of '59, October for a trip out West: Wisconsin, Oregon and

a few other places. Actually I'm not totally clear of where we went that autumn, I think it was certainly the Far West and maybe Michigan. I know that Wisconsin was a state he did not campaign in for John Kennedy because of his residual tie to Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] and I know that made the so called "Irish Mafia" in the White House regard him as deep down untrustworthy, because Wisconsin was the test of pure loyalty. But, I had gone with him on that trip, with the understanding that I would come back to Harvard, finish up a thesis in its first draft and then join him in January in his congressional office. By that time, as far as

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I know the negotiations with Sorensen or Kennedy or both had been completed; I can't recall myself when exactly the announcement of his status as foreign policy advisor was made….

STERN: The end of '59.

THOMSON: End of '59, so that had been announced and from then on we were doing yeomen service in the cause of John Kennedy, with Chet Bowles aspiring to the office of Secretary of State. There is no firm indication, either from the oral tradition that I received or from any document that I have ever seen, that he was guaranteed any such office, but that was his chief hope and expectation and certainly the expectation of the staff. Tom Hughes [Thomas L. Hughes] former staff like Abram Chayes and others.

STERN: What about the Stevenson issue? Didn't that put him in a rather uncomfortable position, considering at least the possibility that Stevenson might be Secretary of State.

THOMSON: I think Chet had high hopes and considerable anxieties because the line of candidates for that office was considerable, Bill Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] as well as Stevenson. Eventually a man named Rusk [Dean Rusk] got the job. Mr. Bowles having heard that, and I leap ahead, proposed in a strong staffing memo to the President-Elect that as for Dean Rusk of the Rockefeller Foundation, he would be a marvelous Under-

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Secretary of State. That was included in the last paragraph of the memorandum because Mr. Bowles had heard a rumor that Mr. Rusk was under consideration for Secretary of State and wanted to shoot that one down as rapidly as possible. He spoke I think of his marvelous qualities, Mr. Rusk's, as a number-two-type person and by implication how inadequate he would be for the number one-type position. A message I'm sure that eventually got through to Mr. Rusk by whatever channels create leakage.

STERN: If we could back up for a minute, into the earlier part of 1960. Bowles mentioned in his book, for example, that he and JFK met periodically during that spring to talk about foreign policy and that they critiqued each other's foreign policy addresses. Did you have any role in that at all? Do you remember the sorts of things they were saying to each other?

THOMSON: I was very uninvolved in such matters. Messengers like Richard Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] would fly in and fly out of our very small office crammed with many too many bodies. We had one outer room with about eight people in it and one bathroom between us, separating us and

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maybe a coffee pot. Sorensen seldom showed if negotiations took place; I was certainly not involved in them. Tom Hughes would have been much more involved in them. And they were staff-level negotiations, I would assume it was Hughes to Goodwin and Goodwin to Sorensen. I was not aware of Mr. Bowles visiting Senator Kennedy's office very often but I might not have been aware. Senator Kennedy once visited our office and that was a very exciting moment.

STERN: Was that before he was nominated?

THOMSON: It was after he was nominated. It was probably before the congressional term ended and the campaign began. If that is possible. I can't remember those dates. But he came in and he was a startlingly charismatic presence and he looked in Technicolor quite striking. And I also remember that he gazed up and down every good-looking woman in the office with what we all agreed afterwards was X-ray vision. X-ray and X-rated. But each of them had felt that she had been possessed by the candidate and it was a good feeling. But he said something that was a little unsettling to the assembled staff. He said that he looked forward so much to the great work that Congressman Bowles and our office would be doing for the new administration.

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STERN: Suggesting that he wanted Bowles to stay in Congress….

THOMSON: Suggesting I thought that Bowles would be one of his right-hand men in the House of Representatives, which certainly is not what Mr. Bowles had in mind. And not necessarily what those of us with lofty ambition had in mind. But I know nothing about those negotiations.

STERN: How about the acceptance….

THOMSON: I came on as a speech writer which unfortunately developed into a talent. And one should always be warned not to show talent in speech writing because once…. It's apparently a rare talent and if you can do it well it's very hard to get out of that rut, to get shifted out of rhetoric and into substance.

STERN: How about the platform committee hearings, the regional hearings and were you involved in that at all?

THOMSON: Yes. I was particularly involved in the week or ten days or whatever it was in Los Angeles of actual platform hearings. The regional ones I can't recall if I attended; I think probably not. Bowles took the platform assignment very seriously. I think he saw it as a platform as well as a launching pad.

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But he was also very serious about getting the issues of the agenda for the sixties out, debated, getting the Democratic position articulated in bold liberal terms. It was not pure personal ambition at work, it was a marvelous combination of ambition and idealism which fuels a number of these people.

STERN: How about the civil rights platform. The plank. I know there was considerable controversy over that and apparently there was some difficulty with RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] over it.

THOMSON: All I recall is a small incident when I had to deliver a message to John Stennis [John C. Stennis] as to how we hoped he would help us out at one critical moment in that civil rights plank and John Stennis in the most courtly fashion assured me that although his heart was in the matter, one had to remember his constituents and Ambassador Bowles as he called, in his courtly fashion, might be disappointed in the way he would have to vote.

STERN: How about this little Bowles-for-president thing which developed in Los Angeles? Apparently you had some role in…

THOMSON: I will tell you…

STERN: …trying to calm that.

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THOMSON: I must tell you, yes all right let's begin with that. But that reminds me of the feminist issue in the platform hearings because it is a small footnote to history. One of my assignments during the year 1960, prior to the convention was to write letters of appreciation, cautionary letters of appreciation to those who were urging a Bowles candidacy for the presidency. And a…

STERN: This I presume was after he accepted Kennedy's offer.

THOMSON: Yes. And the final paragraph was always something about, how grateful he was for such support, of course he was committed to the candidacy of Senator Kennedy. But if lightning should strike he might be available. The lightning strikes sentence was always part of that paragraph. When we got to the convention there were a few clusters of zealots, namely from Pittsburgh, a dentist and his wife, and from Wisconsin and a few other places, California, a California liberal group had pockets of Bowles supporters, movements for Bowles, they were so-called and I was urged, to find I believe to go and tell them please close down their booths at the convention. I don't know if I used the lightning strikes paragraph but for the time being to lie low, you are doing no great service to Bowles or to the party.

STERN: Apparently there was a press conference or

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something scheduled, which you had to go and quash as I recall?

THOMSON: That memory has escaped me. There may well have been. Tom Hughes would remember the name of the dentist and wife from Pittsburgh who were the epicenter of this small cyclone.

STERN: The teeth of the movement.

THOMSON: The teeth, [laughter] I think we were…. I think we had dentures. [Laughter] As with the feminist issue, there was a marvelous moment in the platform committee when, again the names will have departed from my mind, Bowles had announced the composition of the drafting committee and the eighty-eight year old chairman of the National Womens Party, which went back to the suffragette period, who was also a Democratic Committeewoman from Pennsylvania. I think of Emma Woodchuck Bear—but that was not her name. It had three names, obviously a WASP connotation—came staggering up to the platform with her cane and said, "Mr. Bowles." "Oh yes, Mrs. Bear." "Mr. Bowles, eighteen members of your drafting committee and not one of them a woman?" And he clutched for the support and pieces of paper and looked down the list and said, "On the contrary, Mrs. Bear, we have Patsy

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Takemoto Mink [Patsy Mink] from Hawaii and we have Ella Grasso [Ella T. Grasso] from Connecticut." And she pulled herself up to her full height of five foot three and said, "And not one American woman." [Laughter] It was a great moment in WASP feminist history.

STERN: Do you recall any specific clashes between Bowles and Robert Kennedy over the civil rights plank. There are some indications that RFK was very concerned with the plank, it went much too far and it caused problems during the campaign, and held that against Bowles.

THOMSON: I recall…. I was not party to any such clashes.

STERN: Okay. How about the vice presidential nomination. Do you have any recollection of the speculation that was current in Los Angeles? And what was Bowles' reaction to the selection of Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]? Apparently it was quite a surprise.

THOMSON: Well I was in the hotel room of Bowles' marvelous secretary and she and I got the news by telephone at that moment and she was up the wall in outrage and indignation and I tried to calm her down but we were both profoundly disappointed. Very distressed at this gesture towards fat cat conservative Texans, the very well disliked ingredient in the party. Bowles was again very discreet with us. I doubt that it pleased him at all. But to his lower staff people he certainly did not express his indignation

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or disappointment. It certainly shifted Kennedy from the, from Bowles viewpoint in the wrong direction. By the way there is a theme that will emerge from all this and that is that I think John Kennedy found Chester Bowles a useful pawn in bringing along the Stevenson wing of the party. With Eleanor Roosevelt [Anna Eleanor Roosevelt] so deeply opposed to him, he needed a good old New Dealer type, that's the first point. The second point is that Bowles throughout all these months and throughout the years that Kennedy was alive and president had an almost unquenchable, undefeatable yearning to bring out the real Kennedy who was a true liberal, hiding in rather eccentric clothing. And Bowles never lost faith that he could somehow bring out the real liberal in Kennedy, the real progressive, the real New Dealer, while the rest of us, who were all basically Stevensonians thought there wasn't much hope, that Bowles was being led on, being used by Kennedy and that Kennedy would give him a few words of encouragement but basically go on his own track, the track of the so-called pragmatism. The third general point in this overall theme is that Bowles's style was so far removed from Kennedy's style. Bowles tended to be long-winded in writing and rather evangelical in his speech and Bowles basically bored Kennedy. Now my wife has a factor, many years ago which I think is accurate. He did not simply bore Kennedy, he

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bothered Kennedy, in the sense that he induced some guilt in Kennedy. Because the idealism that Bowles brought, tried to hammer into Kennedy, in memos that were much too long and conversations that lasted beyond the President's toleration, this idealism touched upon at least a portion of Kennedy's real self. Bowles and I later on felt that Kennedy was a divided

person in many directions but that it was almost perfectly symbolic that he had working for him both Ted Sorensen, who despite his file, was a sort of Nebraska populist, liberal. And McGeorge Bundy who was a conservative Republican on domestic issues, though a liberal…. Though a Republican internationalist on foreign issues. And it's those two chief counselors who were at least two quadrants of the President.

STERN: I have something I would like to return to later, I have some questions bearing on that whole point.

THOMSON: Bowles always thought he could talk through Sorensen, though I'm not sure how much got through, and felt that Mac Bundy was alien.

STERN: Apparently after the convention Kennedy dangled the question of Secretary of State again before Bowles, although Bowles mentions in his own memoirs that he didn't take it very seriously. Do you have any recollection of that?

THOMSON: Well the election took place over about two days

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because it was hanging fire for day number two. I was in Essex, Connecticut, at the Bowles house and I went through several election eves at the Bowles' house in which the Democrats had regularly lost. We were wondering if it had happened again. At that point, Bowles did a statesman-like thing, which is in his character. He told me that I had a decision as to whether I would finish my PhD right then or eight years hence if ever. Eight years meaning two terms of John Kennedy. And I said, "Well sir, I prefer"—no one ever called him sir—but I said, "I prefer, I guess, if those are the options to do it now." He said then, the only way to do it was to get away. "I will give you my house on North Haven Island, in Maine, it will be very cold and you will take all your books and typewriters and paper and you will not come back until you have finished the thesis. But be here by January one. Be in Washington by January one." So my knowledge of what happened after the election is entirely through listening to Edward P. Morgan every night on the radio and every now and then picking up the telephone.

STERN: So you didn't go on any of the campaign trips…

THOMSON: This is from election day…

STERN: Oh, I see.

THOMSON: This is the day after the election when Kennedy finally it turns out, has won. That's when it happened.

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STERN: The beginning of November to the beginning of January.

THOMSON: November fourth and…. Meanwhile I got married which was an interesting complication. So, I was out of the picture as a participant until January third, I guess, between November fourth and January third. Now, what I learned after the fact from friendly Bowlesiens was that—and you may correct me if this is wrong—Kennedy had come very close to choosing Fulbright, had decided that he could live with the Fulbright race record, because once he was liberated from Arkansas, the Senator would rapidly become a friend of Africa. He could live with the blacks and their distrust of Fulbright but, unfortunately my friend Abram Chayes, another strong Bowles person, had gone to the New York Jewish community, along with several others, like Bowles' lawyers Ginsburg [Charles David Ginsburg], David Ginsburg, and had organized such a Jewish backlash against Fulbright for his position on the Middle East as to cause the President to pull back from the naming of Fulbright. If I have any hard feelings about appointments it was that the destruction of Fulbright's candidacy allowed Mr. Rusk to get the job. And that some of my friends were responsible for that tragedy.

STERN: Did you talk at all to Bowles about the undersecretaryship before he took it? I'm particularly interested in what

his expectations were and whether he thought he could work as an underling to Rusk?

THOMSON: Once I learned that he had been made Undersecretary I was on the phone soon of course, and once we were going through the planning sessions from January third onward downstairs at State, with Mr. Rusk's office at one end of the room and Bowles at the other end of the room. There was a constant litany from Bowles of how it would work, and must work, and what a good team it would be. He was a real school boy, Boy Scout, trying to play it absolutely the right way and marvelous combination of backgrounds and talents and differing perspectives and it would all work fine. I didn't think at the time that he was whistling in the dark. I didn't know that much about Mr. Rusk. He assured us that he had known Rusk. That he was on the board of the Rockefeller Foundation and had found him an extraordinary reasonable man at all their board meetings. Rusk had been apparently affable to Bowles. There was one extraordinarily awkward first Bowles' small cocktail party or dinner where the Rusks came over and I was present, before either of them were in office. And Mrs. Bowles [Dorothy Stebbins Bowles], who is one of the world's freest most informal people said, "You know Dean, they say you look like a bartender and you really do." Many people would have accepted that as a gentle, humorous

comment and Mr. Rusk absolutely froze up. And I'm afraid the relationship from the very beginning was oil and water, cat and dog, and it was a mutual problem but one of the central—obviously I'm anticipating some of your questions—but one of the aspects of that problem was that Bowles had never been basically number two to anyone and did not know how to do it. He was not as he described Rusk in his famous immediate post election memo—I was around for that memo—an ideal chief of staff. He had described Rusk as the ideal chief of staff and number two man and Bowles, did not have the chemistry for that role.

STERN: I think that's quite clear. There are some additional questions. Let's just get back to, for a minute, to the earlier campaign questions. Did you have any role at all on the briefings that Bowles had with Secretary Herter [Christian A. Herter] during the campaign?

THOMSON: No.

STERN: Were you involved at all in the campaign tours.

THOMSON: Yes.

STERN: Anything worthwhile on that?

THOMSON: No, we met some marvelous people. I discovered states I didn't know existed. We were mainly sent to states where Bowles was a great big plus.

STERN: That's exactly what…. I assumed, for example,

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that you went to California?

THOMSON: California, Michigan, Oregon, Minnesota, the state of Washington.

STERN: Kennedy lost almost all of them as it turned out.

THOMSON: How difficult of you to remind me. [Laughter]

STERN: I'm not implying cause and effect, just the facts.

THOMSON: No, he was obviously sent where his folks, allegedly excited, his constituencies. It was great fun. I was bag carrier and ticket manager. Once I was introduced as his secretary and the man said, "Is that right, Mr. Thomson?" I said, "Actually, assistant." He said, "This is Mr. Bowles' assistant secretary." [Laughter] Meaning that the steno, the real number one steno couldn't make it that night.[Laughter]

STERN: What about the story concerning Bowles' decision not to run for reelection. Apparently there was some differences with the Kennedys over that.

THOMSON: I was told by our folks—and that means staff talk, Bowles' staff talk—that Kennedy was very disgruntled by that. That Bowles, having severed his ties with the House of Representatives, made it even more imperative that Kennedy give him some kind of job. That goes back to my earlier story about his visit to the House of Representatives, urging us to be his strong right arm when he became president. So, I think that was not part of the game plan, the White House game plan. And I'm sure it made them feel—

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them meaning, the Irish mafia and I use the term lovingly. My wife is Irish. The Irish mafia felt, yet again that Bowles was not a really trustworthy type. Not a total loyalist. He had been a Stevensonian and a Humphreyite. He had gone for Kennedy, as he explained to us, because that was the only way to go in New England at that point.

STERN: Apparently, Robert Kennedy had some role in writing Bowles' resignation letter for him, from the House. Do you have any recollection of that or…

THOMSON: I have no such, that's the first I've heard of that. Robert Kennedy helped write that letter. I would have thought that Bowles resigned without consulting them but I may be wrong.

STERN: He apparently did consult them and once their advice was not taken, I have seen something that would suggest that Robert Kennedy helped draft the letter of resignation but it's no great matter. Did you ever campaign at all with the candidate himself at any point?

THOMSON: John Kennedy? No.

STERN: You never appeared at the same place at the same time?

THOMSON: Nope. Met him that one time in the House of Representatives, was in the room with him at a number of press conferences. Never to my knowledge met him otherwise.

STERN: I would like to turn now to the very early days of the new administration, particularly to your role and Bowles' role in terms of key appointments both in the State Department and in terms of the foreign service. The files

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certainly indicated that you had a lot to do in that area. That it was a major preoccupation for some time. I wonder if you could describe that process and exactly what you did and then I have some additional specifics on it.

THOMSON: When I got back from North Haven and my wedding and quick honeymoon, this is now January 4, 1961. I found, as I said, Bowles and Rusk downstairs at State, I moved in, I was appointed January fourth to the Department of State, even before he was appointed undersecretary or confirmed. There was a process going on that was quite extraordinary, day and night. Mr. Rusk had either shrewdly or conveniently given Bowles basic free reign to the staffing at highest levels of all U.S. embassies abroad and for the staffing of some, it turned out, of the assistant secretaryships. I was involved as a fender-offer of supplicants. Years of marvelous Democrats out of office, by the hundreds, writing in. Category a, b, c, d and e, in terms of form letter response as well as some very special people. I was to fend these people off, say how much we appreciated their desire to serve and to be giving us consideration. These are letters for his signature, not mine of course. Meanwhile Mr. Bowles is meeting in a steady, all-day-long queue of potential candidates for all these slots. And he is working…. He is checking with Dean Rusk, I think at the

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end of every day or sometime during the day. But, he has this vast list, which is terribly secret, of all the embassy slots plus some assistant secretary slots. And he is doing this thing with two absolutely trusted confidants, one who is his secretary, Pat Durand [Patricia Durand], who takes the list home and types it in her apartment in Washington, because it is so sensitive, for the next day's session. You will have, Japan: capital, Tokyo, then a list of four or five possible candidates for ambassador. Countries alphabetical. The second confidant, for reasons obscure to me, was Edmund Gullion [Edmund A. Gullion], a foreign service officer, who had served in Vietnam and had caught Senator Kennedy's attention as a thoughtful critic then—he turned into a super war hawk later—thoughtful critic of the French policy and whatever else was going on. I think because Kennedy trusted Gullion and Bowles perhaps had met Gullion, Gullion was Bowles' insider career foreign service advisor. Which was a very peculiar slot for someone not totally senior. Pat Durand, Ed Gullion, Chet Bowles with Tom Hughes floating in and out, Abe Chayes and some other people, making…. Harris Wofford [Harris L. Wofford, Jr.] suggestions. And each day we would begin with a list and by the end of the day some people had dropped from number one to number five, and some people had been dropped off the list, and some new names had been added. But I did get involved in that process as well as the epistolary process

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of thanking people for their kind offer to serve.

STERN: Can you recall the kinds of things which caused people to drop to number five or off the lists?

THOMSON: Well, the classic case. There were some cases that were presidential prerogatives. John Kenneth Galbraith was appointed to India, I would say, very early by the President himself. The President decreed that. Earl Smith [Earl E.T. Smith], another presidential prerogative, was appointed to Switzerland and the Swiss got angry and Kennedy tried to find someone who really could cause the Swiss annoyance, he was very angry at the Swiss as you know. But, Mrs. Bowles would say, "Who was that wonderful man who we knew, who knows so much about Burma?" That's an evening dinner at the Bowles' and just a few staff people and Chet wouldn't' remember the name and then she'd get the name the next day and then his name would get on the list. This happened to be Frank Trager [Frank N. Trager], but he got on the list a little late because John Everton [John S. Everton] of a foundation also knew about Burma and he had been put on fairly early. What Bowles was doing, and it wasn't a bad process, it had a marvelous sloppiness that would drive Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] crazy. I would pick up as we used to, the telephone when certain calls came in, we had a little button so that I couldn't be heard breathing and hear Ralph Dungan chewing out Chet Bowles for, "Jesus Christ,

why, you just gave us this name now you want to change it around, and what the hell is going on over there?" Well it was a kind of creative anarchy. And the more important word is creative than anarchy though it might have seemed like anarchy. Because they were really brainstorming and what they were trying to do was match every time they could, the department's candidate, the Foreign Service's candidate. Bowles used to get apoplectic about the cover sheet for a candidacy. "Here is one of our really more promising younger men," for ambassador to something. And you look how young this man is and he is sixty-one or fifty-eight. And Bowles who felt very strongly that the Foreign Service was full of deadwood and that the wood had become deader under Dulles [John Foster Dulles] and his bully boys. Bowles was not basically anti-Foreign Service, he was just very distrustful of what the bureaucracy coughed up. And he would try to create for every slot a competition between the proposed bureaucrat, the system's candidate vis-à-vis some outsider. And he was very opposed to the normal political hacks. The people who had given $10,000 or $100,000. He wanted to bring in educators, journalists, foundation people, people with expertise in the country or the region or the world. And so there was this constant competition. The case in point that I would cite would be Japan. Where…

[END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE]

THOMSON: The department's candidate for Ambassador to Japan, which is the great Asian plum, was J. Graham Parsons, as I have mentioned, the outgoing assistant secretary, who had been a very close ally of the Cold War, architect of the Cold War in Asia and ally of Dulles. Bowles and others were adamant that Parsons would not get the job and eventually he was shifted off to Sweden. But the lobby, the

Parsons lobby was considerable. Meanwhile there were several self-pushed candidates, including a man named Frank Gibney, a journalist who had written a book about Japan and eventually became Encyclopedia's representative in Japan. He was not a bad character but really didn't have the stature. I periodically would tell Mr. Bowles that at Harvard there was a marvelous professor named Edwin O. Reischauer, steeped in Japan, brought up in Japan, wise man on Japan, not touched by the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] era, unlike his colleague Fairbank [John King Fairbank]. Bowles would try to write the name. He found it hard to spell and impossible to pronounce. But I got the name on the list and then at the end of each day, sequence of days, I would find that Reischauer had dropped off the list so I would get Pat Durand please to put it back on the list

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as she typed up the list freshly for the next day and usually at the top of the list, Myron Taylor [Myron C. Taylor], for some reason, our former Ambassador to the Vatican, was also on the list of outside possibilities. Every morning when I would finally see Mr. Bowles, we'd get to Tokyo, he'd say, "Now what's this one, 'Reischauer,' who's that one?" I'd say, "Well, Chet I've told you, don't you remember? He's the…." "Oh yeah, that one." So by the end of the day it would usually be off and then when Mr. Bowles would see Mr. Rusk—Mr. Rusk said once, in his cryptic fashion, "much too academic, not right." So the name would fall off the list and I would get it back on. I began to despair of this process except that during the first or second snowstorm prior to the inauguration, two days prior to that snowstorm I had a call, out of the blue—God was working on my side—from Edwin O. Reischauer saying he was just back from Korea and very worried about the situation there. Wondered if he could talk to the undersecretary-designate on the Korean situation. So I set up the appointment, Bowles said, "Who is that?" and I said, "Reischauer, that's the one I mentioned." He said, "Well, I'll give him ten minutes but I don't have time for Korea." That day, a Thursday, one of three snowstorms on Thursdays, Reischauer came in and was kept waiting, finally saw Bowles about 4:15 for ten minutes allegedly. However, one hour goes by, two hours go by, Mr. Bowles then walks Mr. Reischauer down the hall to see Dean Rusk and then Bowles shakes his hand and goes back to his office

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and Reischauer can't get home. No cab, no nothing, heavy snow. So, I say, "Let me take you out to supper. There's a little place right next to where the State Department," used to be.

STERN: Right.

THOMSON: And he looks absolutely drained. And I said, "How'd it go?" And he said, "Well, very peculiar." I said, "Did you get to talk about Korea?" He said, "Well no." I said, "What happened?" He said, "He offered me the ambassadorship to Japan." [Laughter] I said, "Wow, super." And off we went to talk about it at suppertime, and it took him about a week to decide yes. I think he decided yes, immediately, though it was a great surprise to him. And then it took three months to get him

cleared because—and he would call me every Friday to ask his name to be withdrawn—the problem was that he lived in so many places that the full field check took a long time. This sounds anecdotal but it's important to history I think. Finally, Roger Jones [Roger W. Jones], an otherwise decent civil servant, came rushing into Bowles' office one day with a very confidential document, looking as if he had been struck by lightning. Left it with Bowles. Bowles then called me in. He said, "Let me show you what this is."

STERN: I'm pretty sure I know what document you're talking about.

THOMSON: He showed me an FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]

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piece of paper, two pieces I guess—a cover note and maybe it was just one. Very dramatic blue cover, and it merely said that on… Oh, and Bowles said that Jones has just come to me and said, "The Reischauer appointment is over, it cannot be done. Let me show you the evidence." The evidence was a paragraph the FBI had passed to us from Senator McCarran's [Patrick A. McCarran] report on the Institute of Pacific Relations, in which it was alleged, it said, "It has been discovered that the subject was a close colleague of one John K. Fairbanks, plural, who was designated or judged by the McCarran Internal Subcommittee on…." whatever, "to be a witting or unwitting agent of the Communist, of the Stalinist conspiracy." I said, "So what else is new?" He said, "You know what I told Roger Jones? I told him that if they really worried about John Fairbank and his influence on this government, his brother-in-law Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] is sitting right at the President's side in the White House." He said, "I told them to go stuff it." So we got…. Meanwhile, the Foreign Service had launched a campaign against Mr. Reischauer. Mr. Parsons himself had, I guess had, a deputy send out a piece of paper saying that we should know that the Japanese were concerned about the fact that Mrs. Reischauer [Haru M. Reischauer] was Japanese. We also got word that the American community, military community, was concerned that the Ambassador would have a Japanese wife. That would be very difficult to deal with. Finally, the business community felt that he was much too liberal or radical. I had my Friday phone call each week to tell Reischauer

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to keep his shirt on. Bowles kept telling me to tell him to keep his shirt on. So, eventually by June, Mr. Reischauer was on his way.

STERN: I was very much struck by all that material which of course is in your papers. The FBI material is just incredible.

THOMSON: I didn't know I had it in my papers. [Laughter] Someday I must look at my papers.

STERN: I can cite some of it to you, the exact words were that "He was a close associate of John Fairbank, Owen Lattimore, Bisson [Thomas A. Bisson]…"

THOMSON: T.A. Bisson.

STERN: "…who were believed to be secretly allied with the Communists." They also attached him because his writing had often been used in the *Worker* [*Daily Worker*[1]]. There is also a memo from the embassy in Tokyo from—I don't remember the person's name—claiming that there would be "psychological and protocol problems" because of his Japanese wife and the fact that she had a son living in Japan.

THOMSON: Yes, that may be the point that I had misrecalled because that was passed on with a little note from FE [Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, State Department] saying, "You should be aware of this, Mr. Undersecretary." So the in-house campaign and the Japanese conservative campaign was fairly intense on this subject. And I must say that Bowles stood his ground.

On other embassies there were some marvelous appointments.

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He tried to get John Badeau [John S. Badeau] appointed Ambassador to Iran which would have been the right appointment.

STERN: He went to Egypt.

THOMSON: William Polk [William R. Polk] had come by to see me before he had got appointed to policy planning. He was the Harvard Middle East specialist. And had urged strongly—I think he was looking for a job himself—but he had also urged strongly that Badeau be sent to Iran because the Shah [Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi] was going to cause us some real problems and it took someone who understood the Middle East to stand up to the Shah and keep him from getting all the goodies that he would demand out of us. What happened was that in a rather unfortunate effort to increase Foreign Service morale, we sent someone else to Iran who had been under some kind of allegedly unfair indictment for having profiteered off post war shipping. Do you remember who I'm talking about? Our ambassador to Iran. Who had fallen under a shadow and the Foreign Service felt very strongly that this guy had been unjustly accused and he was sent to Iran. And Badeau, by a Bowlesian kind of fluke, was sent to Cairo where he had been President of the American University of Cairo and because he was known as sort of a local

[1] In 1968 became *Daily World*

academic, Nasser [Gamal Abdel Nasser] wouldn't talk to him for the first year. Badeau eventually got a good relationship developing with the Egyptians but it took a while because he was fingered already as being a Christian evangelist

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and missionary educator and all that stuff. There were other peculiarities. Joe Kraft [Joseph Kraft] wanted very much to go to Algeria and that never happened, as ambassador. No, Tunisia sorry, Algeria hadn't quite broken loose. That's because Joe allegedly being Jewish could not, would not be tolerated but I don't know there was some in-fighting there that was very peculiar. And a….

STERN: Do you recall any, for example, Gullion's appointment or Attwood [William H. Attwood] to Guinea or…

THOMSON: Attwood to Guinea was very much a Bowles appointment. Although Attwood, I think, was a friend of Kennedy's too. The man to Bolivia from Saranac, the upstate New York publisher, Jim, liberal publisher….

STERN: Loeb [James I. Loeb].

THOMSON: Loeb, right, was very much a Bowles appointment. John Everton to Burma. I think that's his name. Turned out not to be a…. He would have been fine with U Nu but with Ne Win he was out in the cold sort of. I think the Bowles record of embassy appointments—a lot of whose names do not come back to me this instant—was fresh faces. He actually did lift up the younger Foreign Service officers. These were not all outsiders. The ratio actually stayed around 65 percent career and 35 percent noncareer. But the caliber of the outside appointments, with the exception of Mr. Earl Smith, was by and large a whole new lift, a whole new trill, a quality of

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Expertise, intelligence, knowledge, that was very much Chet Bowles' doing. Now in this process, Mr. Bowles lost control of two major areas. One was day-to-day policy, from day one, because he was still—for the first three, four, five months of '61—filling embassy slots. And the papers piled up in his office. He became known as a great road block, bottleneck, because he would not automatically sign off on papers until he had really thought through what the issues were. And he was sufficiently suspicious of the producers of the papers, so that he did not want to have the automaticity of the Foster Dulles policies, despite Herter's benign refrain, perpetuated

without a very close look. Now, his desire for a very close look, given only twenty-four hours a day, kept him from acting. So a lot of people in the department began to bypass Mr. Bowles and go, if possible, to Alex Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] or other people, to the Secretary of State himself. The word was also out that he was anti Foreign Service. People like Clare Timberlake [Clare H. Timberlake] who was retired by the new administration. People like Graham Parsons' allies felt this was a very bad guy. And people like Dean Acheson [Dean G. Acheson] had long felt that he was soft in the head anyways, about little black, brown and yellow people. The combination resulted in the July

effort to dismiss him. And finally the November success in dismissing him.

STERN: I would like to hold off on that for a few minutes if it's all right.

THOMSON: I have leaped ahead.

STERN: How about some of the….

THOMSON: James Gavin [James M. Gavin] was a presidential appointment as far as I know. J.K. Galbraith was presidential, Gavin was presidential, Kennan [George Frost Kennan], I believe, was a Bowles inspiration. And they had been quite in close touch during the years in the wilderness. I had watched their correspondence in which they had agreed that they disagreed about some things but on such basic things they were in agreement that they must keep in touch. And Bowles thought this wise man and this great listening post are made for each other. I think he sold that idea. He had allies over there in people like Arthur Schlesinger, who would push a similar person. Fulbright also takes credit for the Reischauer appointment, though Mr. Reischauer will admit that my version is accurate. Mr. Fulbright had also pushed for Reischauer to Japan. And that's fine, wherever you could find allies you grabbed them. Other names?

STERN: What about some of the appointments such as Murrow [Edward R. Murrow] to USIA [United States Information Agency]?

THOMSON: That was Bowles inspiration. He had learned. He knew Ed Murrow fairly well. He had learned that

Ed was dissatisfied. He felt he could be had. A lot of other people had apparently said that's impossible, he won't do it. And Murrow was obtainable.

STERN: How about Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.] for INR [Intelligence and Research]?

THOMSON: Oh, the other area in which Bowles lost control, besides day-to-day policy making, because of his preoccupation with staffing embassies, and here I digress. But the other area was the assistant secretaryships; at least some of the important ones. I digress merely to say that the world I learned to know in Washington, divided between those who believed that foreign policy is based on people, putting the right people in the right place, and those who believed that rational…that the best foreign policy is based on procedures, people versus procedures. I think Mr. Rusk was par excellence a procedures person. Mr. Rusk's famous *Foreign Affairs* article, which attracted him to Kennedy's attention has a paragraph which says that with total clarity. Bowles then believed that no procedures made any difference until and unless you had the right fifteen or fifty people in the right spots. Loyal to the ideas, the thrust, the policies of the President and the Secretary of State. That's why he wasted all this time, so-called wasted, while Mr. Rusk was a tidy desk person.

Bowles always told me with a certain contempt about visiting occasionally his old colleague and adversary, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Mr. Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff] who had absolutely a clean desk. Bowles rested his case on the fact that nothing, the reason why nothing

was getting done at HEW was because Ribicoff had a clean desk. He signs off on anything and got it "in" box, "out" box. Zoom, zoom, didn't care about who was doing what and what the issues were.

Back to the assistant secretaries. Rusk either shrewdly or by accident kept his hands on certain key assistant secretaryships. He, for instance, brought in only one secretary and she finally ended up in protocol. Rusk was such a loner it was unbelievable. Bowles brought in a claque or a clique. George Ball [George W. Ball] developed one fast and was smarter about it because he used in-house talent as well as out-house talent. Rusk was a total loner. Brought in Connie—I believe her name was—and Connie ended up in protocol. She came from the Rockefeller Foundation, ended up, I believe, having…. Foster Dulles' secretary, secretary for a while and then she married in September. But it was as if nothing had changed at that end of the seventh floor.

Rusk also had two friends from the past about whom he felt strongly as one recalls this. One was—who's name I have just abolished—the Deputy Undersecretary

who became Ambassador to Japan eventually. The great paper carrier, U. Alexis Johnson. U. Alexis Johnson is quintessence of bureaucratic mediocrity rising to the top. Rusk had a great attachment to Alex Johnson and Alex Johnson, as far as I know, has never had an original idea in his life, if he's still living. And is a marvelous paper person, gets the papers moving, running up and down that corridor with papers. A

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fretful small bore moron. No, not a moron, a smart man, but smart in the narrowest sense. His other was Walter McConaughy [Walter P. McConaughy]. When he got rid of Jeff Parsons in FE, which was the most hide-bound of the bureaus, the desire was to clean the place out. But Rusk insisted that Walter McConaughy be made the Assistant Secretary and Walter McConaughy is a decent southern gentleman who has never disobeyed an order or had an original thought. And was a product of the 1950s as well.

On the subject of…. Bowles worked…. And Europe was Rusk's other domain. He insisted that whoever was…. Bill Tyler [William R. Tyler, Jr.] or whatever be appointed, Bowles was moderately uninterested in Europe and let that happen. The question as to who would be Ambassador to Moscow and I can't remember how that got resolved, what happened on that. But these were things that Rusk…. I think George McGhee [George C. McGhee] was a Rusk appointment too for policy planning? Not in his own vacant mind. He's not a questioner. Not the kind of person a policy planner should be. But Bowles won his way with Tom Hughes as deputy at INR [Intelligence Research] with Abe Chayes that was a battle, legal advisor. Abe Chayes was resisted by Dean Acheson [Dean G. Acheson] and confronted Dean Acheson in a very gutsy way. He said, "I understand you're blocking my appointment." And Acheson backed down. "Well, how could you think that. I'll pick up the phone this minute." But he had blocked the appointment temporarily. And Abe Chayes was an activist legal advisor

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as opposed to the house lawyer who tells you how to do things, how to do whatever you want to do. Abe got into the substance of policy for better or for worse. I think usually for better. Hilsman, I don't know where he came from. He was Library of Congress. He was a Kennedy supporter and activist. He became a close friend of Bowles. As a matter of fact when he got out of government he moved to Bowles' territory, up the Connecticut Rover, Old Lyme. Phil Talbot [Phillips Talbot] I think was a Bowles mistake. Bowles wanted someone out of, I guess, foundation life, who knew that part of the world and Talbot turned out to be a bit of a marshmallow. Galbraith is very severe about Talbot. I think Talbot is a decent man but Talbot tended to bend with the wind. If we were pro-Pakistan, then Talbot would go that way and so

forth. Latin America, Bowles was trying, tried hard to make a dent there and brought in Morales-Carrion [Arturo Morales-Carrion] and one other…

STERN: Was Moscoso [Teodoro Moscoso]?

THOMSON: Moscoso. Bowles also brought in the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] Connecticut guy whose name has gone out of my mind but he went…. He became sort of a force in AID [Agency for International Development]. What other bureaus did we have? That's about it almost. It was a mixed picture in terms of the bureaus and not…. Bowles had been pushing that Harriman [William Averell Harriman] should become FE instead of McConaughy. And it was one of the smaller ironies of the Thanksgiving massacre that when Bowles was dumped that Harriman was put into

FE which was a long time Bowles proposal.

STERN: How about Foster [William C. Foster] for arms control and disarmament [U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency]? Is that something Bowles had a hand in?

THOMSON: It doesn't ring a bell. And I think he was a disaster. I can't remember. No maybe I'm thinking of Hamilton, Fowler Hamilton for AID.

STERN: Oh yes.

THOMSON: That was a disaster. Foster I have no recollections about one way or another. Fowler Hamilton—I think Bowles had been pro-Labouisse [Henry R. Labouisse] but Labouisse got caught in the AID review and all that stuff and I think Dungan had turned against Labouisse. Foster, what was his first name, William?

STERN: William. What about Phil Coombs [Philip H. Coombs]…

THOMSON: Ah! Oh yes.

STERN: …or Education and Cultural [Educational and Cultural Affairs]? Apparently that's quite a story.

THOMSON: That was a Bowles protégé and that was, I would say of the Bowles entourage, that was probably a major booboo. Bowles has always felt that Philip Coombs knows more about economics or something than anyone on earth. There, I think, his loyalty misled him because Coombs was not adequate in that job. But he certainly was a Bowles appointment.

STERN: Do you have any recollection of the incident that led to his resignation?

THOMSON: No, unless you can prod my memory. All I recall is that the place was a mess. That he didn't….

STERN: Apparently there is some indication that he was eliminated because he was close to Bowles essentially

it was the spin-off—spill-off.

THOMSON: Well that could be totally true because he was so close to Bowles.

STERN: Did you feel that Bowles, in his own recollections…

THOMSON: By the way, in the totally off the transcript of this conversation, I forgot to mention that Mr. Gullion somehow fell out fairly early. He lasted through, let's say, December and January, the transition. But Bowles began to disesteem his advice and the Gullion part of the appointment procedure was ended and Mr. Gullion, who eventually ended up in the Congo—eventually had to leave the Congo, and this is the off-the-record part, although you probably know the story, because it turned out that in some form of innocence he had not realized that when you live abroad you still had to pay income tax, and for many years he had not paid his income tax. So he was very gently retired and won a deanship of the Fletcher School [Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University]. A story that I find absolutely bizarre.

STERN: One of many. Do you feel that Bowles made a mistake in making the decision early in the administration to essentially cut, substantially cut his contacts with the Congress and his contacts with the White House on the…

THOMSON: Yes.

STERN: He did. On the notion that he should not appear to be going around Rusk. This eliminated his influence.

THOMSON: Yes. Here is a most peculiar thing about him. He had never played second fiddle. He had never been a number two person except under a president with whom he had a trust,

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Truman [Harry S. Truman], and even Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. He is, despite his evangelism, an inherently shy person. He is shy in pushing himself forward except in long memos. And what he failed to do and what George Ball did with great skill and charm and a sort of self-effacing grace, what he failed to do was drop around at the White House, drop around at the Congress. Keep up all those ties. Some of which were, it must be said, were moderately flimsy. But he didn't even build on the ties he had. It was because he was trying for the first time in his life—a rather spoiled life, life of a spoiled child—he was trying to be a team player. He was an innocent in a long night of knives.

STERN: I was struck by sort of a parallel in terms of what Bowles did vis-à-vis Stevenson in that he felt he had to be very cautious about Stevenson's sensibilities. It struck me as sort of an interesting parallel. And yet I wonder to what degree Rusk was sensitive to what Bowles was doing, whether or not he distrusted him.

THOMSON: I would have no idea of the answer. It's an interesting parallel. I used to talk to Lucius Battle [Lucius D. Battle] at some length about the Bowles-Rusk relationship, because Luke and I got along extremely well and he was in despair about—and Luke got along with both parties very well. He was in despair about how on earth to get them to hear each other when they talk.

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It was his view that Rusk couldn't wait to get Bowles out of his office, whenever Bowles went to his office, which was seldom, and that Bowles was somehow uncomprehending of how to communicate with Rusk. They were oil and water, Luke and I agreed way back then. And it was somehow tragic. At least from Luke's viewpoint because he admired Rusk or liked Rusk. I didn't like Rusk. I was a very strong partisan for Bowles. He liked them both. I think Bowles was inherently shy and also inherently insecure about—for all he might say to affirm his confidence—unsure of his relationship with Kennedy.

STERN: I was just about to ask that. Whether he thought he really had that relationship.

THOMSON: He was constantly questing for the portion of Kennedy that he believed he could bring to life, bring to the surface, bring out the best in this real progressive. Idealist—tough-minded pragmatic idealist in this guy. And he never gave up. And even in his book—which I—all of us were asked to help edit—he never dumped, in my view sufficiently on his enemies and he never probed the heart of his problem with the President.

STERN: I think if you read between the lines of the book you can see a great deal of dissatisfaction with Kennedy, which he seemed very reluctant to come out and really affirm. But it's there.

THOMSON: It was a very hard situation. You had gone through eight years of what seemed to many of us, disastrous domestic and foreign policies, especially foreign—the Dulles

syndrome. Despite Eisenhower's benign qualities. And here was—he was your only president, your only Democratic president. And you had to believe he could be brought along, that he could be educated in public to your view of the universe. If you didn't believe that there was no option except to quit and then there were other options.

STERN: I think Kennedy also had a quality which tended to make very different people who pursued and believed in very different things to think that somehow that they really had his ear.

THOMSON: One of his ears.

STERN: Yes, right.

THOMSON: Well, that's a Roosevelt, that's an FDR quality. FDR was a little warmer and hammier about it. Kennedy was more terse. Kennedy's terseness made Bowles uncomfortable and Bowles' prolix qualities made Kennedy feel uncomfortable. But Rusk if you were to say…. I would say Rusk's chemistry was not Kennedy's either. As matter of fact, I had a most curious—this is well beyond where we are at on this interview. But I had to appear on a platform with Mr. Rusk, both of us were commentators. Two papers on the Vietnam war for the American Historical Association. Were you there? No, probably not.

Atlanta, 1974, December. Maybe ’75. Must have been ’75, Vietnam was over. It was a curious session in many ways. But the most curious thing was Rusk in his commentary suddenly lunging out at the assembled six hundred historians saying, “As for those Pentagon Papers, so-called. Who are those

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Secret historians who supposedly put this together? Who are… What are their qualifications? The editors and the compilers. It’s your duty as historians to find out their names, find out their credentials….” I just sort of wanted to turn to the guy and say “Hey, why don’t you just call Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara]. It was his project and he knows all their names and he could tell you.” That’s how far removed he was as of December ’75 from this curious administration. And in an aside to me at the end—and we hadn’t scraped very much; we had been on opposite sides during the event but we were friendly. He had first said, “were you part of that project?” And I said, “No sir. Never knew about it until the thirteenth of June 1971, *New York Times*.” And he said, “You up there in that Kennedy Institute?” I said, “No, I run the Neiman Fellowships and you ought to come up and talk to our journalists some time.” He said, “Do you know that Kennedy Institute, it has never once—I was President Kennedy’s principle advisor on foreign affairs, his principle cabinet officer—I have never once been invited up there.” End of statement.

[END OF TAPE ONE]

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STERN: Do you feel that…. Let me go back to something for a moment. There were a number—you were mentioning earlier—very long memos that Bowles was involved with. I assume that you must have helped a good deal in writing some of these things for him.

THOMSON: Mainly trying to cut them.

STERN: I was struck by a number, particularly that were clustered around the very early period—February, March, January, February, March, 1961—which you could see, at least I think I could see an attempt really at getting at the whole structure of the State Department. For example, there was one on the decision-making process. Bowles was very concerned about the fact that decisions would gather signatures starting at the lower levels and work their way up. He said that this had the quality of freezing opinion and preventing any sort of innovative ideas from getting into the process. Likewise, he had one about ambassadors in the host country and there, what he felt was lack of adequate authority

over agencies, U.S. agencies working within those countries. And, of course, the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] being a classic example of that. And another one on the whole question of foreign aid. He felt a very mistaken emphasis in American foreign aid on military as opposed to economic aid and his desire to separate these two things, these three—and they are three among quite a large group—suggests to me that he did have a set of guiding principles. He did hope to see a fairly substantial change in the way the department

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operated and I wonder, I'm pretty sure he was disappointed and almost put in a position, I think, in which he could not really implement any of these. You almost get the feeling, reading some of them, that there is a sort of desperation as if he had to put them on the record to show that this is how he felt, that he had no real expectation of making these changes. I wonder if you could comment on that?

THOMSON: Well, he was before, during and after his government experience until he got afflicted with Parkinson's disease, an evangelist and educator and I would say educator first. He did in fact, over the years, have a developed overview of our nation's role both at home and in the world. In my view an overly optimistic view. I think he didn't have enough of Niebuhr's [Reinhold Niebuhr] understanding of tragedies and ironies of history. I think he really did and does believe in the perfectibility of humankind. And he found it necessary to try to get the young president and anyone else who would read to share his views and come around and develop a fuller perception at home and especially abroad of what we might do at our best. I think he was very frustrated by the so-called pragmatists who seemed to have no overall scheme of values. He would have counted Mac Bundy among them and he would have counted the young president among them, though he thought the young president's mind was up for grabs. He did despair

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from time to time but he never gave up. These are memos not to clean his record in the history books but to change peoples' way of thinking. We often thought his staff people, we who very often shared his views, that as a communicator, particularly out of Madison Avenue, he didn't know how to put things tersely and briskly and that's why I say one of my major roles was to try to cut the length of these things because one knew the reading and attention span of most of his senior colleagues. One knew that they would say after the third or eighteenth memo "My God, another paper from Bowles. Put it away!" Basically, don't' read it at all. He was a very complicated figure in the history that you deal with. I think he's a real innocent. I think he's an over-optimist on the human condition and the perfectibility of man but an absolutely

non-stoppable educator and did have a coherent and does have a coherent scheme of how things could and would and might be better.

STERN: I personally can say that I have never gone through papers and found as much coherence in terms of a position, a person's position. You could predict his position on X issue because you knew his position on Y issue. It was very coherent, very clear, very concise. No, not concise, that's the wrong word.

THOMSON: Someday you must—this is an aside—try talking to the best foreign service officer I think who ever worked for him, Sam Lewis [Samuel W. Lewis], now our Ambassador to Israel. He really shared much of Bowles' views and yet knew

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interstices of the bureaucratic establishment far better and had the loyalty at risk of destroying his career to stay with Bowles, when Bowles was in darkness after the massacre for quite a long time. And Sam would be very sage on what we were trying to talk about right there. Sam and I were co-cutters of Bowlesian prose. "Don't send Mr. Rusk another memo of that length."

STERN: I would like to turn to the Bay of Pigs and the problems which Bowles encountered over that. His March 31, 1961 memo which was very, very clear in his hostility to what he assumed was happening. Apparently he didn't know as much as he would have liked to know but in which he made these two essential points, namely, that such an adventure would, first, very badly damage the President in the Third World and, two, I was very struck by this sort of naiveté of this, the second point which was that it violated OAS [Organization of American States] principles. And yet it was very striking that he would say that. I think it conforms to the picture that you have been presenting. Did you have anything to do with writing that memo? Did you discuss it with him? What did the two of you know?

THOMSON: Bowles kept super secret secrets of that nature to himself. I learned about that memo only through my friendly relationship with his secretary Pat Durand, who showed me as she was typing it late

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one evening the document and allowed me very quickly to read it, sworn to secrecy. I was otherwise totally uninvolved. He never asked, he never told me what was cooking

and never asked me my views. As far as I know he didn't ask anyone except, consult with anyone except those already informed which would have been Abram Chayes in his job as legal advisor and maybe Tom Hughes who was only then deputy at INR, but within the office this was the most closely-held type stuff and as I say it was only the accident of my friendship with his secretary that caused me to know. That's the last I knew about anything cooking until the newspapers reported the invasion. And then that week ends up…. Go ahead.

STERN: Did he ever say anything to you about this conversation he had with Rusk. He had apparently gone to Rusk, telling Rusk he was going to see the President personally. He was going to violate his own…. When Rusk told him essentially that it had been very very much scaled down.

THOMSON: Yeah, two rowboats and….

STERN: And Bowles asked if it would make the front page of the *New York Times*; Rusk said no.

THOMSON: I was told that later when the thing burst into print in terms of the accusation that Bowles had leaked to the press his dissent. We gathered around to find out what the hell the story was. And he did, in

fact, tell me or tell us whoever it was that he had been assured, that he had, in fact, made a pitch to Rusk and had said before such a thing happens that he wanted to have his time with the President to make his case and had been assured by Rusk that the thing had been cut so far down as to be virtually inconsequential.

STERN: You think that his, do you know whether his ultimate reaction to that conversation with Rusk was that he assumed that Rusk had deliberately misled him to prevent him from seeing the President?

THOMSON: His curious refusal to lash out at Rusk leaves me, even in his book, leaves me perplexed. It's almost as if he still wants to be appointed to another job. Even when the book was written, when he was over the hill, sort of. He has never been as severe on Rusk as I think he should have been. And I don't know why not except for a kind of ineffable decency which is one of weakness as well as strength.

STERN: What about the leaks? Did you have any idea where they came from?

THOMSON: I have two impressions and when Bowles' book was in draft I said you really have to come cleaner on this stuff.

STERN: The coverage is not adequate.

THOMSON: I can't recall now what he finally said in the book but, I said, it was my understanding and I forget the days, what day was which, but that Scotty Reston [James B. Reston]

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had come over to the Bowles' house, let us say, on a Saturday afternoon which was sort of Scotty's way of doing things or used to be. "I need to talk to you about something." And sitting by the swimming pool, early April or just a few days before of just the weekend before. He said we have this information about this project. And what do you know about it? And that Bowles said to Reston, roughly, "I know there was such a plan and I have expressed my total opposition to it and I've been assured that it has been cut down to virtually nothing. The original plan has been abandoned." Which then gave Reston to give to Wallace Turner, Wallace Carroll [John Wallace Carroll]…. Wallace Carroll, who's byline came on the story the following Thursday, that among those who had opposed the invasion was not only Fulbright and Schlesinger listed—I can't remember back—but Chester Bowles. Now, there is another possible source of leakage which I only had suggested to me by others and that is that in his consultations with Abe Chayes, of course he had expressed his violent opposition, and that Abe had somehow let the word get out. But I have no grounds for accusing Abe of such a thing and I think it is much simpler to assume that Reston put two and two together and that Wallace Carroll added it to the first column in this story.

STERN: Apparently, Robert Kennedy thought that Bowles himself was responsible for the leaks.

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THOMSON: I know that. I know that. I know that that soured with finality whatever was left of an already bad relationship with the President's brother, who was the keeper of loyalism. And *Newsweek* or *Time* claimed that. This one colorful story of Kennedy, Robert, saying "You said you were against it. You weren't against it. You were for it," punching in with the forefinger. I

asked Bowles once if that had ever happened and he said no. But he said no in that fashion that maybe indicated that Kennedy, Robert, had chewed him out but not quite in that fashion. That's certainly the impression that Robert Kennedy seems to have come away with. From everything I know, that's not the way it happened. The closest thing to leakage was the Reston story. And some day you'll have to get Reston's account.

STERN: Okay, what about, let's move on to the almost massacre of July '61. Can you discuss your side of that. How you found out? Bowles mentioned, for example, that he spoke to his staff, of course, as soon as he had this conversation with Rusk, in which Rusk suggested that he leave and he take a roving ambassadorship or an embassy in Latin America. How did you assess it? What did you think was happening? What advice did you give him?

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THOMSON: Well the first inkling of real deep trouble that month of July was a Charles Bartlett [Charles L. Bartlett] column. Bowles suggested that since I knew Bartlett's good friend Walter Pincus [Walter H. Pincus], I should…. The column was something like the problem at State is with Chester Bowles, and since Bartlett was a close friend of the President's this looked like dangerous material. Walter Pincus was a close friend of Bartlett's so I was asked to call Pincus who got me, arranged for me to see Bartlett. And I was supposed to tell Bartlett, which I did, the marvelous things Bowles had been doing at State. I remember the session quite clearly. "I read your piece and I think you really don't have the full story. Here's what we've been up to." Not sure what happened out of that. Bartlett I think never wrote a friendly piece, meanwhile Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop] got into the act and Dean Acheson was quoted. "What's the problem with State? One word, Bowles." Maybe two words, Chester Bowles. We did, once Bowles had some inkling, perhaps. He must have had this conversation with Rusk that things were getting very hot and had an appointment set up with the President. We did brainstorm around the Bowles pool as a staff. Great excitement and a tremendous sense of being in a siege. Here were finally the Stevenson Democrats, the then New Republic Democrats about to be knifed. We used the

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New Republic and Scotty Reston, that was the first channel. Reston announcing, in the *New York Times*, that Bowles was about to go, prematurely, to build a backfire. So when Bowles saw and it was an exciting—small and eventually unsuccessful, temporarily successful—marshaling of that rump faction of the party through using the *New York Times* and I think the *New Republic*, I can't remember. Other papers

picked it up and so when Kennedy saw Bowles, Kennedy was backing away because he didn't want to lose that chunk of his constituency quite that soon and that surgically. So we got a reprieve. The President saw Bowles, he talked about Ambassador to Chile, I think, and Bowles basically said that he wanted to do what he was doing. But it was arranged that there would be a slight shift in responsibilities and housekeeping—which was one of the major allegations, he wasn't keeping house, dirty kitchen—would be shifted more towards George Ball. And as I thought about it later, presidents don't like to have their wills frustrated that way and it was only a temporary reprieve and there were some rather nasty columns by various people and also Washington gossip saying, even Schlesinger, Arthur Schlesinger, was quoted as having said, "The only person in town who doesn't know that Chester Bowles has been fired

is Chester Bowles." Joe Alsop went all out on this subject.

STERN: Very strikingly parallel to the incident after the Cuban missile crisis involving Stevenson. Which also followed a Bartlett article and then rallied liberal support around Stevenson. He appeared to be in big trouble. Very much parallel. Apparently Stevenson saw himself in a position very much of the type Bowles had been in.

THOMSON: Oh, we also got Stevenson to call the White House or to call Rusk or to call someone and say what an outrageous thing is this being suggested after Scotty writes his piece. We got various people to call in.

STERN: Did you call people yourself? Were you involved in that?

THOMSON: Well, I'm not the level of person to call Ambassador Stevenson, at that time. I don't recall calling people of clout. There were some other people…. Oh I know, Stevenson was off in Europe, I think, he called in from Europe. Is it possible that Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford] called? No, he's not an old pal. Several people called in, were organized to call in, were informed of the impending disaster and registered their shock, lest this be true.

STERN: When I interviewed Clayton Fritchey, who was Stevenson's chief press aide at the UN [United Nations],

he recalled the efforts after the ’62 incident and he said, we all remember the Bowles incident. And to us it was just a repeat of the same thing. We had to marshal our resources and put tremendous pressure on the White House. Show him that he would lose his liberal constituency.

THOMSON: Well, it was necessary to remind the guy that he needed to some degree of a liberal constituency. It didn’t work, it postponed things and then in the autumn Bowles was off traveling. He had organized ambassadorial conferences and got a moderately bad press for that because he believed that spouses, including ambassadors’ spouses should be involved in representation abroad and stop just giving tea parties but think about the conditions of the slums and this was regarded as a great boondoggle. So, that autumn he was wandering, I guess, I don’t remember where. Well, that summer we went on to Africa, Cyprus and New Delhi, for three conferences, right after the close call. Then came November.

STERN: I would assume that between July and November his relationship with Rusk must have been essentially zero.

THOMSON: Well, we all became moderately paranoid, though we felt temporarily victorious. What their relationship was, was unclear to me. The other undersecretary, Mr. Ball, had picked up a lot of the traffic. I

Didn’t really see… I saw him as roving undersecretary, doing what he was probably best at, given the circumstances. I didn’t see a final beheading in the immediate offing. I thought we could weather it. There’s a lot of wishful thinking in it.

STERN: So it was pretty much a shock to you in November?

THOMSON: I was staying at the Bowles’ house for the Yale-Harvard game. It happened to be Thanksgiving weekend as well, I think, yes it was. And he got a call, either before, during or after the Yale-Harvard game to be back in Washington the next day, Sunday. I have preserved in my archives somewhere, marvelous little tiny sheet of note paper in which he says, “Jim, I am off to Washington tomorrow. Rusk has asked to see me. I wonder what this means?” It was very uncharacteristic. He had signed it “C” and then had drawn a little face with eyebrows raised. That Sunday evening, we get the word that there’s been a big shift. And then we call in frantically to find out what the hell and he is trying to decide whether to say screw you, I’m leaving at which point Mr. Sorensen, who is supposed

to be the massage artist, tell him that "if you get out and shout from the roof tops, we will destroy you." And Bowles allegedly replies, "Ted, if you use that kind of language, I have ammunition that can harm

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you people for a long time." So he said, "Well, Chet I didn't really mean that. Let's a…. Why don't' you think it over, you know, over night and the next day, blah blah…." So there is then arranged after a hiatus of a day or two the longest title in Washington history. No, the longest title in Washington history and I would like to get it onto the record, Dr. Stern. I had a card printed, "Special Assistant to the President's Special Representative and Advisor on African, Asian and Latin American Affairs." That's me.

STERN: That gave you the longest title. [Laughter]

THOMSON: Collector's item, my card.

STERN: Bowles it seems to me was very cynical about JFK's seriousness in this new offer, that's certainly the way I read it. It's not entirely clear to me why he took it. It seems to me that his essential attitude was that they don't mean it and that they are not really going to ask me to do anything.

THOMSON: What were his alternatives? He had spent the years 1953 till elected to the House in '58 and moves in, in '59, on the lecture circuit, writing books also. He did not have an university or a law firm to go back to. And he was rather bored with the lecture circuit and this was his party and was going to be in power for many years to come, one assumed. So he decided to swallow it, with, I think, considerable doubts as to whether it would work. At which point some of us stayed with him and I was most proud of the

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Foreign Service characters, two or three of them like, Sam Lewis who stayed with him as we moved down the hall to the roving ambassador's office. He had demanded a White House office and we got one which he used, I think, for the first two weeks, half a day, and then we began to let that fall away because nothing happened over there. That was a dead end street. It was in the EOB [Executive Office Building] which is cavernous and very gloomy. He had use of White House cars and an innocent man, a decent man and an idealist, he still knew about the symbols of power, having fallen from it. I don't know how he survived those months until he wrote after many drafts his letter to the President saying it wasn't working and this was the end.

Which thereupon prompted the offer of how about going back to India. The document I'm sure you've seen.

STERN: Sure.

THOMSON: It went through many drafts and we held it back and we sort of said don't make it too long, we said keep your cool and all that stuff.

STERN: He specifically mentions that he asked the advice of his family, friends, staff and such about whether he should take this job and then once he decided to accept it, then he asked for a very

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substantial discussion about what kind of a job this would be, what sort of things he could reasonably expect to accomplish. To what degree were you in on those discussions and do you recall them?

THOMSON: Well, the title was Balkan…. Balkan light opera with epaulets. [Laughter] The substance was roving ambassador to underdeveloped peoples. He finally got the job of going around to being, you're too young to remember the Grover Whalen [Grover A. Whalen]—that was the New York City official greeter—the Grover Whalen of America to little brown, black and yellow and green people. And since he really had a knack at this, or for this, it wasn't a bad assignment. Though it build up incredible frustrations because he had…. He was really excluded from policy except for education and evangelism as I keep using the words. He took some marvelous trips and had some marvelous conversations. He opened up communications during those months in some delicate places with difficult people, all the way from the Shah to Nasser, to other characters.

STERN: Right, the reports from some of those trips, strike me as being extraordinarily accurate. Particularly in his sense…

THOMSON: Absolutely.

STERN: …of things that were going to happen.

THOMSON: Absolutely.

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STERN: You mention the Shah and for example, his description of the fact that the Shah thinks only of getting military aid.

THOMSON: Right. Right.

STERN: His description of Haile Selassie, which virtually predicted…

THOMSON: Right.

STERN: …what would eventually happen in Ethiopia.

THOMSON: After that particular trip, when he saw the Shah, Nasser, Haile Selassie and a couple of other, maybe Makarios [Archbishop Makarios III], I don't know and a couple of other characters. I said, "What was it like?" He said, "I felt like I had just been on a long walk through the most disturbed ward of a mental hospital." [Laughter] And he said the sanest one of them all was Nasser. It was unusually colorful for Chet and not the kind of thing he'd put in his memos. No, I think he did a useful good. It was, as long as we had this kind of president and that kind of secretary of state, it was probably the only place he could fit in. And it was better than festering, sitting off in Essex, writing op. ed. pieces for the *New York Times*, which didn't have an op. ed. quite then, maybe it did, or whatever, you know, speeches to the League of Women Voters. The frustration content of leaving office would have been even higher than the frustration content of what he did. When finally he chose New Delhi, which took a little thinking and can you go home again was a big, real question. He asked himself and his wife and friends. He did say once it's the furthest you

can get away from Washington and still be in the world's largest democracy. And it was a tough thing. I didn't go with him then and then I got liberated into Far Eastern stuff.

STERN: Did he ask you to go with him? Did you consider it?

THOMSON: I certainly could have gone with him but I really had stayed overlong in the region not closest to my love. I was a China buff, I was an East Asia person and already Roger Hilsman had beckoned—I had come to know him—and had beckoned toward the Far East bureau. I had become Bowles' liaison person with Harriman's bureau before Hilsman took over. And I wanted to get back to my specialty. So I certainly could have gone, and would have gone, but I had always regarded India as a second rate place compared to China.

STERN: This is going to be a fairly difficult question, I wonder if it could be possible to describe—I think this is something that students who read these interviews can use—if it could be possible for you to describe or construct anything that would approach an average day, in other words precisely the sort of things you did when you came to work for the Undersecretary or for the President's special representative from eight in the morning until you went home, at whatever time in the evening. I realize that is very difficult to do but just a sense of what the routine was like. The kind of speech writing, the meetings, hearings,

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going to see this person or that person whatever.

THOMSON: Well, first of all since I am a night person, my tendency would be to arrive late. And try to disguise my late arrival by looking as if I had been in someone else's office for the preceding hour or whatever. But I would get there sometime around nine-thirty. This was before I moved to the White House. On the White House staff I became a little more punctual. But since I knew I wouldn't get home till around eight-thirty or nine at night, I did not feel overly guilty but let's say around nine-thirty, claiming automobile problems or parking difficulties and the staff, marvelous staff of Bowles' own original secretary or two and then the Foreign Service secretaries would cover for me. I then would get to my desk. Right. So there at my desk would be an "in" box and in the "in" box there is a mound of materials, which is the overnight cable traffic both ingoing and outgoing. As I remember one was pink and one was white. Some other things were yellow. It's hard to recall. Also memos on their way for clearance through our office to the Undersecretary or later the roving ambassador, which pertained to my special subjects whatever they might be. It had to do with East Asia or Southeast Asia sometimes. Memos that other members of the staff had passed to me, advising me of some upcoming problem. Schedule of the

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day plus a mass of correspondence that had been somehow routed to me or personally addressed to me. Routed to me for draft response, routed to me for giving instruction to him…

[BEGIN TAPE TWO]

THOMSON: …roughly and they are all jumbled together which is a peculiar scene because you have to sort through them rather fast to figure out what's important and what's unimportant. There is….

STERN: How much help did you have, for example?

THOMSON: Well, we had shared secretaries. There were probably three secretaries for two or three staff members, special assistants, and staff assistants in addition to the boss' secretary, Mr. Bowles' secretary, who is basically doing 98 percent only his work. But the three secretaries are doing overflow from his work as well as our work. In addition there are a few simplifiers that help sort out your morning. One is the Top Secret summary of cable traffic from the night before. And there are various levels of…. There's a Secret summary and there's a Top Secret summary and all that stuff. All of which is in marvelously garbled cable-ese.

STERN: I've seen some of them, I know.

THOMSON: And when one was particularly frustrated one used parodies of Secret and Top Secret summaries and pass them around for general entertainment value. I'd written once incidentally a piece you may or may not have seen. All these special classifications that come on cables. One of them is NIACT, N-I-A-C-T, which means that when the cable

arrives at the embassy you are supposed to wake up the Ambassador even at night time, to get the response. And I invented the concept of DAYACT. And DAYACT is, of course, you wake up the Ambassador even during the day. People thought that was quite funny. But those are on days when you have time to be funny. The other thing that I feel very strongly that has structured one's day before arrival is the managing editor and front page layout editor of the *New York Times*. Because at home probably or certainly on arrival at the office but probably at home you have read the *New York Times* or at least quickly gone over the front page and important stuff. I'm convinced that every bureaucrat who reads classified material comes to the office with a mindset influenced by the executive editor, managing editor, layout editors of the *New York Times*. As you already know what they think is important and that helps influence what you think is important. So you race through this stuff now and check it off. Your initials are on it. Every time you read it check off your initials. There maybe however, on that day a special project. Like the Undersecretary may need a draft of a speech by noon on which he has given you some dictated notes the afternoon before which you may have sweated on at home overnight or thought about at least. In which case you

don’t even read your “in” box, you go right to your typewriter. And if the clatter is too much in the glass partitioned-office large space you maybe

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go to another room and find a quiet typewriter. There are also, as in all offices, a mound of pink slips of phone calls to return from various people about various things and you sort through those. You will also discover that the boss wants to see you at once because he’s changed his mind about what should be in his speech which is due at noon but he has someone with him so you can’t see him for an hour. So you fret about that. Meanwhile shuffling through your papers—and shuffle is really the right term because you’re trying to find out what is important and what’s unimportant and you make little stacks of them, I guess deciding what you’ll read later in the day, which means you don’t read them, and what requires immediate concentration. Coffee is available through some mechanism I can’t recall but there it is and your nice secretaries bring it to you or you go and get it and that sustains you to the lunch hour. Now meanwhile you have or have not drafted this speech, you have answered some of these phone calls and you have maybe written a memo about a memo or a covering note about a cable on which the boss has asked your comments. Whether he should sign, how it should be changed, bla, bla, bla. The lunch hour is…. It varies. If some marvelous Bulgarian diplomat, who thinks that because you’re close to the Undersecretary you can—well, let’s say Polish diplomat—take you out to a very fancy restaurant and tell you the Polish side of the current conflagration, or learn something

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from you, that’s rather fun. You go to the Jockey Club or some other posh restaurant on him; knowing that the place is probably bugged or that the table is probably bugged, at least by our people if not by theirs. If you are fortunate in a different sense, a friendly press person, whom you trust, wants to find out…just wants to check in and be free to have a hamburger down the street. And there’s a place called the Black Steer near the EOB that’s very dark so you have your hamburger and maybe a martini. In your relations with the press you have to be a little careful because you know that big brother is watching. In the Kennedy days it was the attorney general, not the Russians. You feel that way about the telephone too, to be utterly frank. Mr. Bowles once confided in me that he was much more careful in his phone calls for fear the attorney general or the FBI was listening in rather than that the Russians were. Or even the Chinese; I don’t think their technology was up to that yet. And that was an interesting admission which perhaps we can return to, about the tensions between the Kennedy wing and the rad-lib wing of that administration. Otherwise if you are overworked, as you probably are, you can have your lunch brought in from

downstairs by black butlers and or elevator men and the only black faces you saw at the State Department in those days were the butlers and elevator men and they all looked like something out of *Gone with the Wind* and had been there twenty-five years and once they got to

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know you, confided to you that they moved from GS-1 to GS-2 and was there any chance of going to GS-3. A subject on which the Department of State at least was appallingly behind the times and on which Mr. Bowles was very, very good in forcing promotions upward for the black helpers. We also had a black secretary, the first in the undersecretary's office ever. A female and she had been brought in under some early form of affirmative action and was marvelous in character and barely literate, and was therefore was relegated largely to doing telememcons and if the…. In those days the Department of State had a secretary sit in on all conversations of any importance and take alleged short-hand notes on what was said and since our person through a large portion of this—whose name I can't remember but was a marvelous person—if her notes are still around. It would be marvelous because they will seem to be in Martian, a dialect, a kind of English that future generations will think was secret code. They don't make sense! Anyway, if overworked as usual, one has lunch at desk or one zooms down to cafeteria and has a quickie walk through the line in that most dreary place and trying to lose weight always has a cottage cheese with something on it and dressing and maybe another salad and black coffee. Back to desk. If one is still not only trying to lose weight but keep fit, one tries to figure out during the day, before the days of

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jogging, when to sneak off to an important meeting and actually play squash at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], which is the only close squash court. It was usually hard to do—possible to do at lunch hour but basically late in the day like five or six and then come back to the office. Three times a week if you can do it. A great surprise to go to the YMCA which is in those days a terrible dingy place right next to the—that's where Walter Jenkins [Walter W. Jenkins] got into trouble—dingy place right next to the White House and to see in the shower without spectacles and without clothes someone who is clearly McGeorge Bundy who has been swimming. So it is high class and low class when you go and try and preserve your fitness. Back to office. Long afternoon. Toward end of afternoon, evening time, Chester Bowles at least felt very strongly two things. One, his marriage required that he got home by around seven-thirty, and have some bourbon with his wife and have a decent meal. Take home with him a lot of work as did everyone else. Violating all rules of classification because in your briefcases are "Eyes Only," no this and everything else

imaginable and unless you're Foy Kohler [Foy D. Kohler] who got caught when his car got towed away. Inside was his briefcase and they found all these documents. You luck out and you don't get caught. Second principle of Mr. Bowles as boss besides getting home to his wife and preserving his marriage which did not mean that he would stop working, was that he must leave enough work to keep everyone else working while

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he went home. So office—there is no concept of overtime as far as I know. Maybe some people got paid it but he is happiest when he knows that ten pairs of little hands are at work after hours as he has left to go home. Mr. Hilsman, we'll get on to later, who liked to bring in close members of the staff for maybe a drink out of his secret hidden refrigerator as did Mr. Rusk I'm told. Mr. Bowles didn't do that in the office. Just sit around six-thirty, seven o'clock and have a drink and talk about the turmoil of the day and the chaos of the next day. Meanwhile one is left with this mound of work of things to do first thing in the morning. Therefore you leave them overnight so the secretary will get it typed or is typing it as you go home. So the boss will have it. The opening meeting by the way, at State is the Secretary of State's staff meeting for people on the seventh floor and sixth floor which I used to attend if I got there in time, in the place of the Undersecretary. There's the front group who sit around the table and then there are all these little aides who sit around the wall. And once your face is recognizable to the Secret Service, people who man the desks as well as the darkies who run the elevators—I think they were called darkies then…

STERN: I wouldn't be surprised.

THOMSON: …you just come in and sit as a fly on the wall

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and hear the Secretary of State go around the table and ask everyone—this is nine o'clock or nine fifteen, can't remember, White House it was nine fifteen—what's cooking today. What do we have to worry about. Fascinating process goes on until around ten o'clock, a little after. And one small footnote if I don't get around to it later, there was more time spent in those meetings in the Kennedy days, when I went to the Rusk staff meeting dealing with the real enemy as opposed to the alleged enemy. The real enemy was Congress and the press. More time was spent—how the hell do we handle Senator X or Congressman Y—or the editor or the reporter who has done something egregious. I never know what the word "egregious" means but it sounds terrible. Than on what Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] has done or those Chinese or Vietnamese. So,

around eight, eight-thirty I am finally on a good night, driving home after the traffic. On the other end of the day is slightly after the traffic in the morning. That's one reason I'd come in moderately late—out to Alexandria where my wife is feeling very lonely and bereft because I'm late again and we have sort of Spanish dinner time around nine-thirty, ten and I brought home work and stay up quite late trying to plow through that work. Don't read books. Barely read magazines—fall into bed. Get a big hassle from the wife as to why I'm so out of it. Why tonight is not the night to make love because I'm

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so tired. And then comes tomorrow. That's the end of the day.

STERN: How often would be co…

THOMSON: Oh! Parenthesis. Several time a week, Washington dinner parties of either the young set who happened to be bright, light journalist types, lawyer types a few bureaucrat friends but not really that many having dinner parties in Georgetown or thereabouts. Or invitation to a reception at some embassy. In which case wife drives in—meets you at the State Department and you go off to this gathering and life is amended slightly.

STERN: How often would you find your weekends and such disturbed in terms of emergencies and problems and going in on Saturdays?

THOMSON: Oh, I would say it was the norm to count on working a portion of Saturday. Come in moderately later and stay maybe through lunch time. But that doesn't mean lunch. That means around one or two o'clock and then go home. Then of course crisis weekends, both days. Mr. Bowles had a principle that I thought was quite sound which he always tried to pass on to Mr. Rusk with no success and that is that tired people make bad policy. "Dean," he would say, "you ought to take off more weekends." And it was a Bowles principle never to be in the office on Sunday and I think seldom to be in the office on Saturday though he took a lot of work home. And I think he was right because I saw a lot of people make very bad policy because

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they became extremely tired and they could not…. They stopped thinking straight. I think Mr. Rusk might have been a better secretary of state if he had taken this advice seriously but I doubt it.

STERN: That's fascinating. Just as a little aside, when I interviewed Henry Hall Wilson who was Larry O'Brien's [Lawrence F. O'Brien] chief legislative person in the House. He told me that when he first took the job his wife insisted that he call before he came home because she had no idea when he would be getting home. And after a few weeks they discovered that it was not necessary because as soon as the phone began to ring at home she knew that he had left the office because people could no longer reach him and therefore he was on the way home. I thought that was a marvelous little anecdote in terms of the nature of the whole operation that she knew he was on his way because the phone was ringing off the hook.

THOMSON: Right, right.

STERN: Okay, I wonder if you could just describe briefly how you came to work for Roger Hilsman—how the transition occurred?

THOMSON: Well, Roger's deputy was Tom Hughes. Roger therefore knew the Bowles crowd. Roger had been some help to the Bowles staff. Quite a bit now that I think about it when he had been at the Library of Congress because Congressman Bowles had used the Legislative Reference Service heavily and intelligently. Roger discovered that there was a congressman who really was into the interstices of foreign affairs and

had an intelligent staff. I had seen Roger from afar various times in Baguio, conference of ambassadors.

STERN: In the Philippines?

THOMSON: Right. A mountain resort in the Philippines also a military R&R [rest and rehabilitation] place. January '62…

STERN: Date of the conference—March '62.

THOMSON: …March '62. Along with the rest of us and the Undersecretary and Harriman, was INR Director Roger Hilsman and in the course of that conference Roger had somehow been to Taiwan and back or was going to Taiwan and there was a whole shall we or shan't we leash the Chinese nationalists who were getting antsy about trying some funny stuff—reinvasion of the mainland. And in my commentary in small groups with Roger and Chet and others, I guess I began to emerge in Roger's mind as someone who knew something about

China, which, as a matter of fact I did. I had grown up there and had done a Harvard PhD and all that stuff. And from then on I think Hilsman knew of my stuff. We seemed to have an affable relationship. His informal style was simpatico with mine. He had been a Yale graduate student, I had been a Yale undergraduate. That may or may not have helped. But we had a language and perception in common. Around about, oh, by that time the Thanksgiving massacre has happened. Bowles is roving ambassador still co-chairing the Baguio conference with Harriman there muttering away. There is the uncertainly of Bowles' next move and I can't remember

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how it happened except that Roger said once it was learned that Bowles was going to move to India, he said, "How would you like to come and work for me in FE? I need a special projects sort of trouble shooter type. I've got my regular staff assistant and my special assistant. I would like to have you, having been in Congress,"—crazy. I'd been there one year doing not much, but answering letters and stopping the Bowles boomlet, well keeping it alive—"I'd like to have you help me, especially on congressional aspects of the Far East job and would you be willing?" And I talked it out with Bowles who understood totally that my special interest is Far East. And when the Bowles departure came in June—if it was—'63. Oh, I meanwhile had also become, as I had said, sort of Bowles' liaison to FE because Harriman had become interested in my alleged China expertise. So I would attend the Harriman staff meetings to keep Bowles informed of what was going on in the Far East division and that was fine with Harriman. Hilsman replaces Harriman when? Harriman moves up to become some kind of undersecretary and Hilsman moves from INR to FE and makes me this proposal as Chet is scheduled to move to a new job. I work it out with Chet and there's absolutely no hard feelings. Marvelous man this Bowles in many ways. Always sort of let people go in the particular direction that made most sense for them, having rung them dry prior to it. As Abe Chayes once said to me, "Look, he works your ass off when you're off

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the payroll, you might as well be on the payroll and maybe get some money out of it." But I moved happily to FE in June or July of '63 and I remember coming home to my wife and saying, "The most amazing change. Instead of talking about the future of the universe, I spent most of this morning learning about the water supply of Hong Kong and it's so specific. It really makes me feel quite different. Back to reality." That's not a put down on Bowles but you know those cosmic memos had really been part of my life too long. There's another ingredient in this whole procedure and that is that I had made myself—I had found a way to make myself non-indispensable to Bowles. I had been indispensable because of this curious talent at speech writing. And I had

discovered that the only way to get out of that rut—because apparently not too many people have the talent or have it in them—an adjustable fashion to other peoples rhetoric—the only way to get out of the rut is to find someone else who could become his speech writer. And I went all out and I found a kid, so to speak, who had been on the verge of being fired from the Bureau of Public Affairs who is now worth about 100 million dollars and is a massively successful, moderately untrustworthy publisher of Maryland newspapers, Philip Merrill. I hired wet behind the ears, Phil Merrill out of the Bureau of Public Affairs and got him to do two cuts on a Bowles speech and two

drafts. And Bowles liked the stuff, he met the guy and I said, "Okay?" and Bowles in an uneasy way said, "Well let's try him and…" I escaped. And that's what happened. And Merrill finally went to India with Bowles as his speech person. I think I would have had a tougher time breaking with Bowles—cutting the cord if I had not found this replacement person.

STERN: Is there anything you would like to add about your time with Bowles?

THOMSON: Well, I'll send you a copy of my—if I can find it—my Bowles oral history transcript—it may be under some—you can probably get such things out of Yale can't you?

STERN: I think we can, yes.

THOMSON: The only person who's not allowed to read it so far is Mr. Bowles. I mean I made that stipulation as did some of us. I didn't want to hurt the guys feelings but otherwise I was going to make it a very uninteresting document. The alternative was to make it very honest and if you have any problem getting your hands on it let me know.

STERN: Okay.

END OF TAPE TWO

[END OF INTERVIEW]

James C. Thomson Jr. Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List