Tan Sri Ong Yoke Lin Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 8/04/1970
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Biographical Note

Tan Sri Ong Yoke Lin (1917-2010) was the Malaysian Ambassador to the United States from 1962 to 1972. This interview focuses on relations between the United States and Malaysia during the Kennedy administration, Malaysia's attempt to be recognized by the United Nations, and the Cold War's effect on Southeast Asia, among other topics.

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Tan Sri Ong Yoke Lin

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Date

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Tan Sri Ong Yoke Lin– JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

TAN SRI ONG YOKE LIN

August 4, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Ambassador, when was the first time that you met John F. Kennedy?

ONG: When I presented my credentials to the president in July of 1962.

O'BRIEN: You had some occasion to talk to him at that point beyond the normal presentation of credentials, as I understand.

ONG: Oh, yes. I got here a month before that. At that time, my government and our people were very gravely concerned and worried over the U.S. proposal to sell--dispose of--tin from the strategic stockpile. The price of tin had been very badly, severely depressed over the previous few months while this proposal by the U.S. had been announced. At that time, the International Tin Council had sent a delegation to Washington to have discussions, consultations with the U.S. government. The U.S. representatives took a very tough line, and the negotiations were going badly for the producers. You see, tin was a very important export commodity for Malaya in those days, and for Indonesia, and for Thailand and Bolivia and Nigeria. When the negotiations were going badly, I thought I would take the opportunity, when presenting my credentials, to bring this matter up before the president of the United States. I realized that it was a very unusual step to take because, as you know, the occasion of presenting credentials to a head of state by a new ambassador is always a very formal occasion. In fact, the chief of protocal sent a memorandum to me describing in great detail the dos and dont's on such a ceremonial occasion. Some of the

I remember in the memorandum were that you don't discuss anything of a controversial, substantive nature; you take about seven minutes and then you take your leave of the president; and so on.

At that time, I was concurrently accredited to the United Nations. I had to be shuttling forwards and backwards from New York because we had problems in the UN (United Nations), too. At that very time, the arrangement to form Malaysia, to form a larger federation between the then Federation of Malaya and the then British colonial territories of Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. . . . There was opposition from the extreme left-wing parties in Singapore and Sarawak, and they had sent delegations to the United Nations to protest against the formation of this enlarged federation. So I had to be there and coming back.

So since I was so preoccupied with the UN matters, I asked the chief of protocol if I might, since it is a matter of very grave urgency for my country, bring this matter up to the president and ask for his intervention. To my very pleasant surprise, the reply was that the president would--was willing to, so to speak--brush aside protocol--strict protocol--and I could take up this matter with the president. I requested that because I was very impressed before I came with the youthful young man who has captured a great deal of the imagination of the young people in other countries and who, I was convinced, would be sympathetic and not a stickler to conventional methods and protocol. So I took advantage of the occasion and brought this matter up with the president.

He showed great sympathy and understanding. In fact, he gave me the impression he was not rather too aware of what was happening in regard to this particular matter. Then he had an officer from the State Department there. It was Ambassador James Bell, who subsequently became ambassador to Malaysia. He listened very patiently when I told him what grave effects this release of stockpile tin would have on the economy of our developing countries and how we needed every dollar from our export for our development plan. I emphasized to him that we were still having this problem of communist subversion, and how we--having defeated the communist insurgents militarily after twelve long years of war against them between 1948 and 1960--were confident that the way to fight subversion was to improve the living standards of the people, have a free democratic system of government. So we had to depend for our development plan greatly on the export commodities like tin and rubber, mainly. I sort of told him that Malaya. . . . In those days, Malaya did not get any aid from the United States; our policy was to stand on our own feet and to lift ourselves up by our own bootstrap. So apparently, subsequently, he called for a report on those negotiations between the Tin Council representatives and the

United States government. He also told me that I could ask for an appointment to see him if I had come against difficulties of such a nature. So on that occasion, he impressed me very much as a warm-hearted man who showed sympathy and understanding for the problems of developing countries.

O'BRIEN: Yes. In your subsequent dealings with the State Department and the Treasury Department, did you get any feeling that the president had given them any instructions on the matter?

ONG: Yes, subsequently, I think he--well, there were various other actions--yes, I had the distinct impression that the president did intervene, and the intervention did have some effect on the whole atmosphere of the talks. I remember when the talks bogged down again a few weeks later, I called Governor Averell Harriman, who was then assistant secretary of state. One day I talked with Harriman, and I said, "Look, we're still not making progress, and I'm still very worried about the way the talks have been going. Now, I want to take the president up on his offer. I would like to have an appointment to see him again to ask for his intervention because it's a matter of very grave concern to our country." Averell Harriman immediately picked up the phone, rang up the Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and said, "The ambassador is still very worried about the way the tin negotiations have been going on, and he's taking the president up on his offer that he could go see him." So we went instead into the office of the secretary of state, and Averell Harriman told him, "I know you're very busy, but I just thought the ambassador had made a request to see the president on this matter. Perhaps we could see what can be done before we ask for the appointment." I said, "That's all right with me provided things get moving." Then the negotiations proceeded. Although we did not get what we wanted, it was a compromise. I can't remember the details of that compromise solution, but that is what I had to do with President John F. Kennedy in '62, when I was a new ambassador in this country.

O'BRIEN: How did you find Rusk? Did you find Rusk fairly sympathetic at that point to the problems of dumping these stockpile items and what impact it would have on the economy of Malaysia?

ONG: Yes, he was sympathetic, but at that time he had a lot of domestic pressures. Of course, at that time the Senate Preparedness (Investigation) Subcommittee, under the chairmanship of Senator Stuart Symington, was making these investigations, having the hearings on Capitol Hill on a number of stockpile items, including tin. The investigations were directed, as I understood it, against the previous administration's policy on accumulation of vast stockpile, they alleged, much in excess of requirements and so on. So it was probably a political infighting, inside your system. But, subsequently, I must say that after certain experts had testified before this Preparedness Subcommittee of the Senate, Senator Symington, I think, did say that he understood this problem of tin much, much better then. So the whole negotiation atmosphere improved a great deal because the pressure from the Senate subcommittee had been somewhat relieved over tin.

O'BRIEN: Well, Mr. Ambassador, how wide do your contacts range on this? Now, for example, do you talk to Senator Symington directly about the matter?

ONG: No, I did not. But I did contact certain people I knew here who knew the problem: for example, a man who was assistant secretary of labor, George Weaver, who had been to Malaya in 1951 as a member of a goodwill mission on tin from the United States so he had been in touch with the whole problem. He knew the whole problem, and he was one of those who testified before the subcommittee, and he had a very good hearing from the subcommittee. I think Senator Symington said that George Weaver was a recognized international expert on tin.

O'BRIEN: Do you have any contacts with people in Treasury on the matter?

ONG: No, at that time, you see, according to your system, you have all these agencies and departments, interdepartmental committees, interagency, and most of the departments involved in matters of this nature. For example, in respect of stockpile material disposals, of course, the State Department is involved, the Commerce Department is involved, the Labor Department is involved, the Interior Department is involved, Treasury's involved, and then the Bureau of the Budget. So that has been our perennial headache, and that has been one of the very few irritants between the United States and Malaysia. Otherwise, relationships between our two countries have been very friendly--what I would describe as noninvolved cordiality between the two countries. We are not involved in any formal treaty on defense or any other matter. The United States is a very valuable trading partner of Malaysia; we have a favorable balance of trade with the U.S. over many, many years. But this stockpile that had been accumulated at a frantic pace during the Korean War is almost like a sword of Damocles hanging over our head, over our necks.

We always tried to impress on the U.S. authorities that we understood that you have to release some of your stockpile materials, but for God's sake do it under circumstances that would not unduly depress the market. With all your protestations of trying to help developing free countries, democratic countries in the free world, you do something that you could avoid doing, but you do it--depress the prices and ruin our economy. And we're one country that doesn't get aid from the United States--there's no aid program--and you can imagine the feeling of our people. At best, they think the U.S. is most unsympathetic, and their actions do not match their words of trying to help developing countries to ward off there insurgencies, communist subversion, and so on. You talk about freedom, free development, democratic development, and so on. At worst, they think that it is done for political, economic reasons. For example, a drop in the price of this commodity--you know, rubber--seriously affects our budget, our development program, and everything--the very livelihood of our people, the workers, the small-holders, the small producers.

What we tried to ask the United States to do all the time is. . . . Where in a certain period there is a shortage of the product, of the commodity, in the world market--a projected shortage--and the price is good, other conditions are good. You see, there are many factors that affect the price of raw materials like tin and rubber, like world economic situation, like strikes, like war, and other things. Well, those other things, we can't put a blame on any particular government, individuals who run the government. But this release of stockpile can be controlled, can be avoided, can be timed. Even in your own laws, it's written that release of the strategic stockpiles--legislation to govern this--this legislation stipulates that when you release, you must not disrupt the normal market. You must avoid avoidable losses to the U.S. government, to the processors, to the producers, and the consumers. So it's got to be carried out with the greatest of circumspection, the greatest of care and understanding and sympathy for the producers, who are all developing countries, of these raw materials.

O'BRIEN: Well, you mentioned on the phone in our conversation that this was really the major problem between the United States and Malaysia and the . . .

ONG: Oh, yes, for all these years, since I've been here in the last eight years. Every year or so it crops up, particularly election years, the even years. Then some people try to release stockpiles.

O'BRIEN: Well, I wonder if we might change the subject of this for a bit and just ask you how your appointment as ambassador to the United States came about.

ONG: Oh, as you know, I was first elected as one of the leaders of our party to the municipal council in 1952. That was the worst time in the communist insurgency, the height of what we called the emergency. Then in 1955, we were able to persuade the British. . . . After a lot of difficulties, after we had to carry out a noncooperation movement against the British government, we were able to get democratic elections, national elections, in 1955, and I was one of our party members that was elected. So in the interim before independence, we got self-government, internal self-government. I became minister of post and telecommunications in 1955; in 1956, the minister of transport. After independence--we got independence in 1957--in 1957, on Independence Day, I got a new portfolio; I was the first minister of labor and social welfare. Nineteen fifty-nine, we had our first full parliamentary election in that independent country, and we were returned by a good majority. I was one of those who were returned in '59. Then I got the portfolio of health and social welfare. Then in the early 1962. . . .

You see, when we got independence, I recall the prime minister discussing with me and two other colleagues as to appointment of ambassadors, first ambassadors. Of course, we immediately had to do it for Washington, London, Djakarta, the nearby. . . . We were starting new. It was a completely new service so we--now, it shows what great importance we attached to Washington--decided to send a very senior cabinet minister to be ambassador here--to be the first ambassador--and that is (Dato) Dr. Ismail (bin Dato Abdul Rahman). He was a senior minister of the cabinet. He came here to start the mission. He served here for two years and returned home to contest the 1959 election. Then we sent the permanent secretary of the foreign office, the second ambassador. Now, he had been a career civil servant. After two years he said he wanted to go back home; he was broke. It's very expensive to be an ambassador. And then we had about four or five months, this mission had no ambassador. It was under the charge of a chargé d'affaires.

Then I had been sent by our cabinet to negotiate--to consult, really--with Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah, and even Brunei at the end of 1961, to discuss the formation of Malaysia. After that, the prime minister realized that we would have problems because he felt that (Dr. Achmed) Sukarno would give us trouble, and we'd get trouble from our neighbors, and then we had this problem of this tin stockpile release that had really caused us a good deal of harm. One day the prime minister sent word and asked me to have lunch with him. I went up to his house, had lunch with him, and I had some conversation with him after lunch. You see, the prime minister usually after lunch smokes a cigarette and then he goes to bed for his siesta. But that day he said, "Come and sit down and have a. . . ." He wanted to talk to me, and he wasn't going to have his siesta. He said, "I've been rather concerned over this, not having filled this post in Washington--ambassador--and you know how much importance I attach to this post, to our relations with the United States. I was wondering if you might like to take it on for a short time." Then I said, "Well. . . ." He said, "I don't want you to say yes or no now. Go back and consult your wife, consult me, and let me know. Take your own time, but one thing: you go there, you don't like it, you can always come back home. In any case. . . ." You see, our term in Parliament would run approximately five years, and because our party had such a good majority in Parliament, we could almost fix the date for the next election. The prime minister said, "Well, '64 will be the next election. You can come back for that election." "But then," I said, "I will be. . . ." The first thing that occurred to me was that I would be rather letting down my constituents who elected me to Parliament. To go twelve thousand miles away, I wouldn't be able to serve them. So the prime minister said, "Well, you can come home every few months and visit them, and so on." Then I talked to my wife. She said, "Oh, for a couple of years I think it will be all right," since the prime minister's whole team and the cabinet colleagues said they think I should be the one to come here and also concurrently to be permanent representative to the United Nations, where we expected also trouble from Sukarno. To hold those two jobs in those days was really difficult, with problems in the UN with this.

Then in October or November of that year, Sukarno declared confrontation against Malaya and the formation of Malaysia, and the Philippines under President (Diosdado) Macapagal also made a claim over Sabah. The two presidents, President Sukarno and President Macapagal, together applied a great deal of pressure on us. We are a much smaller country than either one of the two--much, much smaller than Indonesia--and we're a new country. Our foreign office, our foreign missions--the number of diplomatic missions and strength of diplomatic personnel--was very low compared to either Indonesia or Philippines, who had been older, established countries. For example, for the whole of the continent of Africa we had only one diplomatic mission; that was in Cairo. In the twenty countries--then there were twenty countries--in Latin America, we didn't have a single diplomatic mission, whereas Indonesia had missions all over the place. So in the diplomatic struggle they had a great advantage over us, plus the fact that Philippines were working hand in hand with them opposing this formation of Malaysia. So on the diplomatic front, we fought a very tough, uphill struggle. But our cause was just, our cause was right.

Oh, coming back to the late President John F. Kennedy. . . . While we were under this tremendous pressure, the confrontation by Sukarno was not only diplomatic; it was military, political, economic, on all fronts. Then in January of 1963, at one of the live press conferences--news conferences--I was watching on the television, President John F. Kennedy, in answer to a question, did say this, that the United States welcomed the formation of Malaysia because it would contribute to the peace and stability of that very important region of Southeast Asia. I think those were more or less his actual words. That was a great statement as far as we were concerned. It was the first time that the president of the United States made a public statement publicly welcoming and in fact supporting--in the face of opposition from Sukarno and Philippines. . . .

O'BRIEN: Did you realize that he was going to make that statement beforehand? Had you had any advance notice at all?

ONG: No, none at all. Well, of course, in my discussions with State Department from Secretary of State Dean Rusk downward, and my acquaintances and friends who were in the White House, I got the distinct impression--in fact, it has been said to me--of course, it was never said sort of publicly, so publicly and so categorically as the president had said it, but I knew that the United States was very sympathetic, both in the executive and the legislative branches of the government, to the formation of this larger federation. After all, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah were then still colonial territories of Britain. The whole rationale of that was that Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore had been very worried at that stage, about 1959-1960, about the Communists in Singapore. They were very active, they were pretty strong, and they were very smart. They did not, as their comrades did in Malaya, adopt military means; they adopted the political means, and that made Lee Kuan Yew very worried. He used to come to see (Y.T.M.) Tunku (Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj), our prime minister, asking that Singapore should merge with Malaya. That was on his party's platform and, indeed, the other parties' that formed, too. Then in Sarawak, for example, the Clandestine Communist Organization, the CCO, was very active. These Communists, their battle cry, their propaganda was "anticolonialism." The British, who had responsibility for the security and defense, naturally as a colonial power would have great difficulty in dealing with these people who claimed to be liberators, patriotic liberators, of their country, of this colonial territory--liberators of the people against colonial rule. For example, if the British were to arrest these Communists, there'd be questions in Westminster, in Parliament, and world opinion; they'd say, "Oh, this is colonial imperialism." So the real leaders of these territories thought the best thing they'd have to get independence. Now, there was a question of whether they'd get independence singly, individually; whether that territory would be viable; or as would be a natural development because we were all under similar type of administration, similar currency, similar education system, language--it was a natural thing. So the support of the United States for this had been quite evident, but it was good for us at that time of difficulty to have the president of the United States categorically stating the support of the United States for this development.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Well, at this time, among men like yourself and the prime minister and the deputy prime minister, the three of you particularly, do you have a great deal of apprehension about the way the British policy is going in preparation for eventual withdrawal?

ONG: There was no indication at that time of British withdrawal.

O'BRIEN: Did you suspect that it was coming at all?

ONG: No, because, you see, when we got independence from Britain, we had to consider that as a small country with very little resources, we weren't going to spend our precious resources on a big defense budget. And we were in that region where the Communists were very active in subversion. We had just gone through a twelve-year, very, very expensive, very costly war against the Communist terrorists, so we decided that we would have a mutual defense treaty with the British. After all, the British had very considerable interests--business interests, investments--in that part of the world, so the British agreed. But, you know, for presentation purposes we signed that treaty after we obtained our independence, as two sovereign countries. I remember there was a debate in Parliament because there were some people--of course, we ruled out SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) immediately because we didn't think that would serve our best interests. There were questions in Parliament, then, as to why we should have a defense treaty with Britain. I remember one of my colleagues, a minister, replied, "Well, it's better to have a deal with a devil we know." There were some eyebrows raised by the Britishers, and this minister quickly qualified and said, "Well, anyway, the British are God-fearing devils." So we had no indication then in '62 and '63. . . . In fact, it was the reverse, that the defense treaty with Britain would continue for an indefinite period. We had always thought that it was in the interest of Britain.

We provided them with bases; we had never had any trouble with British troops in our country; there had never been any irritation or any trouble. They were there and they were accepted. They never caused any trouble--and the Australian troops, the New Zealand troops, the air force and the naval ships--so they provide the external protection for us. After all, we are a maritime nation; we have thousands of miles of coastline. The British naval ships, their patrols, were very valuable to us. Then we had laboriously to build up a small little naval force, a small little air force. but our armed forces, our police, have been excellent. They've been well trained, and they are among the most disciplined troops and police in the world. They acquitted themselves so well fighting the Communists, and we are very confident about internal security. It's only external defense which would cost a lot of money. Even if we spent 80 percent of our budget, we still wouldn't be able to secure our coastlines and so on. So we did need help from the British.

O'BRIEN: Well, in 1961, '62, do you fear the developments that are taking place in Laos and Vietnam at that point?

ONG: Oh, yes. You see, immediately after independence, you know, our Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman--most heads of governments would make their first overseas trip to a big capital like Washington or London, or some go to Moscow or Paris, but, no, the Tunku's first trip abroad was to Saigon. We were very worried about developments there, despite the 1954 Geneva Convention, because we know the Communists. We knew they would be already preparing to subvert and take over. So the prime minister went to Saigon in 1958, talked to Ngo Dinh Diem. He was a bit worried because the Vietnamese themselves, after the French left. . . . The French had not given them any training to do things for themselves, unlike what the British did where we were concerned--more, much more--to prepare us to run our own country. So arrangements were made between our prime minister and Ngo Dinh Diem whereby we offered training facilities for Vietnamese military officers and police officers because by that time we had acquired a great expertise in dealing with communist subversion, communist guerilla warfare. Diem was very impressed. He made a return visit to Kuala, to Malaysia--to Malaya in those days--and I happened to be the minister in attendance because of a head-of-state visit. So I was with Ngo Dinh Diem constantly over his six-day visit. We went to Penang and so on. The Tunku's impression and my impression was that he was a very dedicated patriot, a man who wanted to do everything for his country, who realized that he had a difficult situation on his hands. So since then, we have been giving training facilities--oh, we have given it to about many thousands of South Vietnamese officers--in counterinsurgency, in how to organize against this type of subversion by the Communists, and so on, and we have hoped that that has been of some value to the South Vietnamese. We were worried even then about the long-range plans of the Communists, directed, of course, from Red China. That is why in our case, we concentrated on economic development, raising standard of living of the low income groups, in having a democratic system of government. And, well, we have done fairly well.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Were you instrumental, too, in sending that police advisory training mission that Sir Robert Thompson apparently had in Saigon in 1961? Was that part of this?

ONG: No. I think that it was part of the prime minister's plan or desire to help as much as possible. You see, Sir Robert Thompson was a British career civil servant in our country during the colonial period. I've known him since immediately after the war, Second World War. He was still a young officer. I remember I attended his wedding. He married the daughter of the chief secretary there, the number 2 man, a British. . . . He was private secretary to the chief secretary, and he married the daughter of the boss. He did excellent work. He went up the ladder, and he had a lot to do in our Defense Ministry, internal defense. He served our government even after independence, and he worked very well with our ministers and other officers of the Ministry of Defense. Then when we were Malayanizing, a lot of British had to leave; our local Malaysians were taking over. I think the Tunku then probably thought that he would be valuable in trying to help because we found at that time that the whole administration in Saigon was very disorganized. What they needed was some sort of a system of government, and it had to be a one-man rule. Everything had to be referred to Diem. He must have worked twenty hours a day. He didn't delegate; that was the weakness of the Saigon government at that time. But without a doubt, Diem was a great patriot of South Vietnam, a strong anti-Communist, and completely devoted to the cause to save his country from communist domination.

O'BRIEN: Well, in terms of the American build-up that takes place there as well as Thailand in the next two years, is this looked on favorably within Malaysia as perhaps a help in protecting Malaysia from, well, you know, the term we use is sometimes the "dominoes theory?" Do you look at it in terms of dominoes? If South Vietnam and Laos fall, then Malaysia will be one of the next dominoes?

ONG: Oh, yes, we are convinced of the expansionist tendencies, policies, of the Maoists. Of course, as far as we in Malaysia are concerned, if the agressors, the expansionist forces, could be checked, it would help us a great deal. Now, domino or no domino, it is a fact that we are the target of subversion; we have been the target of subversion. Now, here is a country like Malaysia. We do no harm to anybody; we are friendly with all our neighboring countries; we have no expansionist tendencies; we have no inclination to create any trouble. All we want is cooperation. We want to be left in peace to pursue our own way of life, that is, a democratic way of life. But day in and day out, subversion is being carried out through Peking, through Hanoi, against us, to subvert our government, to try and overthrow the government, to replace it with a communist type of government. Now, at that range, they're doing that to us. Do you think that if South Vietnam were to fall, they won't go after Laos, they won't go after Cambodia, they won't go after Thailand, they won't go after Indonesia, Philippines? So whether they have a shorthand expression of domino or not, there is an expansionist policy.

Well, the Red Chinese are pretty cautious, too, in pursuing their policy. They're not going to send divisions across the border, but they are doing the subversion through all manners and means--propaganda, all sorts of means, exploiting every situation. We have a certain disadvantage, being a democratic country, that people can express their views, people can criticize the government and mislead the people. It's easier. Whereas in the communist countries like North Vietnam or China, it's not so easy to. The people just can't speak up against their government, and no questions are asked from the government. So they use these tactics. I mean, every country has its own economic ratio, other problems, and we are trying to solve it. We can't do it overnight, but it is terrific pressure. They exploit every weakness, every situation, to create trouble, create chaos, create fear, create suspicion among the people, with a view to overthrowing the government and establish one that would be dominated by them, subservient to them. We don't want to be subservient to any country. We want to be friendly with all countries. So our policy is, if you could have Southeast Asian countries--they are relatively small countries--left alone, we adopt a non-align neutral policy. We don't want to be pawns in any big power struggle; we don't want to be dominated by Red China nor by anybody else.

We know--and I've said this before--as far as the U.S. is concerned--I mean historical facts that cannot be challenged--the U.S. performance in our part of the world. . . . For example, Philippines got her independence without--it was handed to them by the U.S. government. They've received a lot of assistance since then--economic assistance, military assistance. The United States had militarist Japan completely defeated, and yet what did you do? You went in; you gave them help and helped them to develop democratic institutions, democratic system, and, indeed, economic assistance to develop the country; and now Japan is a free democratic country, is one of the economic giants of the world. That is how United States has treated a conquered foe, defeated foe. Well, that's nothing for you to be ashamed of. Then you went into South Korea to help the South Koreans hold off aggression from the Communists. America suffered a high rate of casualties, and now you can be proud of the performance of the South Koreans. They may not have the exact replica of a democratic system as here or Britain or other countries, but there is certainly more freedom, more democracy, in South Korea than there has ever been in North Korea. Their economic development has been most spectacular. I visited South Korea, and I see the morale, the determinations of people to stay free. So that's a good record for the Americans. And in South Vietnam, it's not that you went there for conquest, for territorial expansion, for domination, despite this propaganda against the United States. I mean, I hold no brief for the United States; we are just good friends. I must say my mind in all sincerity, that there's no record of any imperialistic or ulterior motives that you are out to dominate us. So therefore in my work here I can speak very frankly, very plainly, and sometimes very, very pointedly to your officials. I am glad to say that my sometimes strong criticism of your actions and policies have been well taken, in the spirit that I gave it.

O'BRIEN: Did you, in the years 1961, '62, '63, when the insurgency was really beginning to build in Vietnam. . . . Oh, we're just about out on that side. I wonder if I could turn it over.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

O'BRIEN: One question, I think, that would be of a great deal of interest to future scholars is that in 1961 and '62 and '63, when you were here in Washington, did you find a great deal of interest on the part of government officials about the insurgency in Malaya and lessons that might be gained from the study of it that could be applied in what was beginning to develop in Vietnam at that time?

ONG: Oh, yes. I remember that it was President John F. Kennedy. . . . Of course, after the Cuban missile crisis, there was a complete revolutionary thinking in the administration here that perhaps the massive nuclear war was out, so I think it was President Kennedy who ordered troops to be trained in counterinsurgency. That's why they had set up this thing in Fort Bragg, the Green Beret. I remember visiting Fort Bragg with our deputy prime minister in 1963, in the spring of '63, and I visited there on at least two other occasions. I was very struck by the enthusiasm of the officers there that were running the counterinsurgency school. That was preparation for Vietnam. It was President Kennedy who sent more and more and more advisors to help the government of Saigon. When I was at Fort Bragg, the officers there--those are very bright officers--were asking me to tell them about our counterinsurgency activities in my country over those years. They said that they had learned a great deal from our methods. Of course, our country and Vietnam were two very different propositions. In our case, the Communists did not get any significant outside assistance; there was no infiltration of men or materials from across the border because our borders were secure. We only have a common border with Thailand, and Thailand was secure. As far as the seacoasts are concerned, they're well patrolled by the British navy. So they're entirely two different propositions.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have any conversation or talk with Robert Kennedy about the insurgency in Malaya in the fifties, do you recall?

ONG: No.

O'BRIEN: How about Maxwell Taylor, General Taylor? Did you talk to him at any time about it?

ONG: Well, we met. We never got down to really serious talk about it, but there was no doubt that the administration here had followed very closely the events in Malaya in those days. I mean that you were in close touch with the British all through the years. You had your military and other people out in Singapore and your consulates there in those days before independence. There's no doubt that your government had kept very close watch on how we performed. Every time I met people they were full of admiration for the way, firstly, the. . . . After all, the British, Australian, and New Zealand troops were there. But in the final analysis it's a local people's war.

The dramatic collapse of the communist insurgency occurred after we had our first national election. Our party had tremendous support from the people. We were pledged in our election platform to obtain independence, and we had our manifesto. We spelled out the democratic system of our government that we were going to have after independence. That captured the imagination of the people, the support of the people, and you could see the collapse of the communist organization. Surrenders were coming in in '56, '57, '58. Higher and higher ranking officers were surrendering, so much so that in July of 1960, the government of independent Malaya unilaterally declared an end to the emergency, and we had a great celebration. We started this process by declaring white areas or clear areas, because we had these emergency regulations that were an inconvenience to the law-abiding citizens. When we found in a certain area, in a certain state, for example, where we were fairly clear that people were cooperating, the Communists were running away, they were not getting help and assistance from the people--as Mao Tse-tung says, "The Communists are like fish, the guerillas are like fish. They've got to live in water. If there's no water, they can't live. They go away."--we finally declared that whole area a white area. No. We listed all the emergency regulations--no more curfews, no more searches, no more barricades and so on--and the thing just spread like wildfire and made the Communists very unpopular. If they create incidents, we might make it a black area again.

O'BRIEN: Well, you were here for the--did I understand you right--for the Bay of Pigs? You were in the United Nations when the Bay of Pigs happened?

ONG: Not the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis. Yes, Bay of Pigs; I was here when the Bay of Pigs--no, sorry, no, that was earlier on. No, no, the Cuban missile crisis. Yes, of course.

O'BRIEN: When did you first become aware that the missiles were in Cuba and that the United States was going to take some sort of stiff action?

ONG: Well, as a diplomat observing events, indeed, there was something strange in the air those few days, when suddenly President Kennedy cancelled his speaking engagements and pleaded a cold and rushed back to Washington over that weekend--what was it?

O'BRIEN: It was October.

ONG: October 22nd or something, the Cuban missile crisis. And that weekend. . . . Then, of course, it was announced that the president would be making a statement over television and radio at 7:00 a certain evening, so our eyes were glued to the television set. Then we were invited immediately to the State Department for briefing. It was very well coordinated. I think the staff work was very good. At the very same time, all the capitals of friendly countries were informed, and it was all a simultaneous operation. I mean, we have read so many of these cloak-and-dagger type of operation: they send all these emissaries abroad, and how they slip off the press and do it with a great element of surprise. So after the briefing, I came back and had to send an urgent telegram home. I went to the UN the following day.

Now, what struck me was the absolute calm, confidence of the American people. Here was the president of the United States talking about declaration of war by Congress. I mean, that was nearer any declaration of war that has ever happened in history; I mean, at any moment it would have been a nuclear war. And yet people were calm. I think the important thing then was that--I mean, if there had been a lot of criticism and carping and so on against the president's action, things might have turned out differently--as far as (Nikita S.) Khrushchev was concerned, Kennedy spoke with absolute authority and with the full backing of the nation. I think that tells a big story.

O'BRIEN: Did you find a great deal of concern in the diplomatic community at that time about the possible outcome? Was there a great deal of apprehension?

ONG: You know, I remember when we heard the president's broadcast. Late at night I went to the State Department, and it was really touch and go. I mean, the blockade--or what you call quarantine--and then Russian ships were streaming there. I called my office as to this, and I said, "Look here, is there any emergency plan for evacuation? I heard about it. There must be something like that." Then they said, "Well, yes, there's something like that, but we have no details of it." I said, "What do you chaps think?" "Oh, I think we just stay around. If this thing were to happen, there's nowhere you can go." We were quite fatalistic about it, and so we were quite calm and said, "Well, let's see what the outcome is." Somewhere, somehow, people were thinking that this thing couldn't happen, you know, this end of the world, you see. Then we watched the events, and the rest is history.

O'BRIEN: Sure. Well, you become an ex officio member of the Cuban Missile Crisis Poker Club, as you were telling me the other day. I wonder if we could talk about that for a bit. How does that come about?

ONG: Well, I was invited to a poker game among these people. I remember we had people involved in the crisis. Pierre Salinger was one. John Scali of ABC (American Broadcasting Company) was involved. You know, he was the one who was approached by the Soviet first secretary, and he was the one who carried the message to Dean Rusk and then to the White House of the first break. John Scali; then we had Carl Rowan, who was then in the administration; Art Buchwald, who was very close to, I think, Pierre Salinger; and David Brinkley. We had Llewellyn Thompson later on. We had regular sort of weekly or fortnightly poker sessions here, and I remember such of them. . . . (Charles E.) Chip Bohlen used to come back from Paris and would play with us, and once or twice Dean Rusk would play with us. So it appeared that during the crisis these people were, you know, waiting things out, and they started playing poker just to kill time, to relieve the tension--these few chaps. They they expanded, and I was invited in. Subsequently, there were articles written in the newspapers and in the Sports Illustrated, and they dubbed this as the Cuban Missile Crisis Poker Club. I remember Art Buchwald calling me--they somehow told the press that they called me "the scrutable Oriental." So that poker club has been carrying on with changes of people. Some have gone, like Pierre Salinger has gone, and then later on, when the Johnson administration came in, we had Jack Valenti and all these other White House aides. It's gone through, and we still have Llewellyn Thompson, Chip Bohlen sometimes having a game.

O'BRIEN: Have you played in one particular place or is it a shifting poker game?

ONG: No, we shift from one house to another, and the host will provide cold cuts and beer and coffee.

O'BRIEN: Well, in regard to some of the questions here in regard to the formation of Malaysia and some of your insights on U.S. policy, do you work very close here in the United States with the British in regard to various problems that come up in regard to the resistance that you face in forming Malaysia?

ONG: Oh, in those days?

O'BRIEN: In those days, yes.

ONG: In those days in the UN, in point of fact, the British, quite rightly, were trying to keep away, you see, in the United Nations because it was our business and they didn't want to put what might be called the kiss of death on the thing. But, you know, as I was saying, these political leaders who opposed Malaysia from Singapore came--very articulate people. I remember a man called David Marshall. He came to the United Nations, to the decolonization committee, armed with a legal opinion from the Q.C. (Queen's Counsel) in London, Dingle Foot--I think that there are three brothers. At that time, Sir Michael Foot,[1] who later became Lord Caradon--he was Sir Michael Foot then--was the British representative on that committee. So David Marshall was trying very hard to bait this British representative to say something. He waved that opinion and said, "This is from the distinguished Queen's Counsel, Mr. Dingle Foot," and so on and so forth, that, you know, what Singapore was doing was unconstitutional and so on. He was needling this British representative. So at the end, Sir Michael Foot just said these few words. "In my family the right Foot does not know what the left Foot is doing." So in Washington, no, we don't offer this as bilateral relation, but in the UN we didn't have to. . . .

Well, we fought the case against Indonesia and so on on the merits of our case. It was done through the free will of all the people of the territories. Then, as you know, there was agreement between Sukarno, Macapagal, and the Tunku in that meeting in Manila, the Manila Conference, whereby they invited (Sithu) U Thant to send a mission out to ascertain the wishes of the people in Sarawak and Sabah. In Singapore a referendum had already been held, favoring joining Malaysia, and elections had already been held in Sarawak and Sabah. This United Nations team, sent out by the secretary-general on the invitation of the three heads of government, went out there to ascertain the wishes of the people; to have another look at the elections that had been held, whether they had been held fairly, were there any complaints of unfair election practices, and so on. These two completely independent teams of United Nations international civil servants went out there and submitted a report--and U Thant certainly had the report--to say that it was a free choice of the people to obtain their independence in an enlarged federation with Malaya, to fulfill their desire for independence and freedom, and it was a completely free choice. They found that out.

O'BRIEN: Well, about this time Roger Hilsman becomes assistant secretary for the Far East. Do you have much dealings with him during . . .

ONG: Yes, yes.

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[1] Note: When Ong speaks of Michael Foot as Lord Caradon, it is really his brother, Sir Hugh Mackintosh Foot, who is Lord Caradon. Michael is not even a "Sir," according to '67-'68 International Who's Who. Hugh Foot is also Representative to UN.

O'BRIEN: How did you find him?

ONG: Well, he was obviously a very strong supporter of administration policy in those days. I remember again that, you know, when U Thant's report was made public. . . . Oh, yes, at the Manila Conference, the three heads of government had pledged when they invited U Thant, it was only on that condition that U Thant's findings would not be subject to their concurrent approval. After U Thant has made that categorical report that these people had freely chosen to join Malaysia, Sukarno reneged. I remember at that time, Sukarno had already negotiated with IMF, International Monetary Fund, with the blessing no doubt of the United States for a fifty million dollar loan. Somehow, when he refused to accept U Thant's report and continued confrontation against Malaysia--military confrontation--all of a sudden the IMF loan was withheld. So that was a plus for us.

O'BRIEN: Well, during the confrontation, Prime Minister (Robert G.) Menzies makes--well, he makes a number of trips during the Kennedy administration--but he comes in 1963, and one of the things he comes for is an understanding in the ANZUS (Australia-New Zealand-U.S. Defense Pack) accords, you know, of whether, if Australia becomes involved, the United States will support. Now do you have pretty close consultation with the Australians in this particular aspect--the possibility of military involvement of the Australians and, in turn, U.S. involvement?

ONG: Yes. Of course, according to the ANZUS treaty, it would have been invoked if Australia were involved in hostilities. Of course, there's no doubt that being treaty allies in a military treaty, Prime Minister Menzies and the United States and the New Zealand governments were in very, very close contact. So were they with the British. I had no doubt about that.

Well, I remember when the British prime minister came here, Dean Rusk was very. . . . He used to talk to me a lot whenever we met at parties or. . . . I remember on a couple of occasions--for example, he would tell me one evening that, "Don't be worried because according to our assessment, Sukarno won't be able to launch any serious military operation because the British order of battle is quite clear there. We don't think Sukarno would try anything big." That was very encouraging. I remember the British prime minister came at a White House party. He told me that he had a long talk with the president, and the U.S. was very sympathetic. But at that time, according to our treaty with Britain, British forces--and the Australian and New Zealand governments associated themselves with that treaty we had with Britain. It was a bilateral treaty, but they associated themselves with it. The forces they brought to the area were--well, relative to Sukarno's forces--pretty overwhelming. So that stopped Sukarno in his tracks--Sukarno and his communist allies.

O'BRIEN: There were three events and areas of policy that Malaysia was involved in, decisions that Malaysia was involved in. I thought that the United States may have attempted to make some representations in. One is the admission of Red China. Another one is the decision of Malaysia to send troops to the Congo. Then the third was the Save Democracy Fund, you know, to help India.

ONG: India, yes.

O'BRIEN: Is there much consultation and much in the way of attempts to influence Malaysia by the United States?

ONG: No. Well, of course, on the question of admission of Red China naturally everybody lobbied, you see, both sides--in fact, three sides--the U.S. side, the communist side, and the neutral side, the nonaligned side. So, I mean, there was some lobbying going on, but we have always made our decisions quite independently on these issues. Now, that is the admission of Red China.

The Save Democracy Fund was a completely spontaneous, sincere effort by our prime minister. He happened to be on an official visit to India when the Chinese attacked in the fall of 1962. He immediately called on the free world to help India defend democracy, and he condemned the Chinese for aggression in no uncertain terms. He went back home, immediately started to collect money. It's not so much that we could collect a lot of money, but it was the gesture. He spoke out for India. He launched a campaign to collect funds to help India.

What was the third one? The Congo. We were approached by Dag Hammarskjöld, by the United Nations secretary-general. It was an appeal sent out. We were concerned; it was a matter of principle. It was at the United Nations. . . . You know, in those days we had great faith in the United Nations being able to have this kind of operation--peace-keeping. So we say, "Well, we may need such help from member countries for peace-keeping. We should respond." So we responded. Of course, the U.S. provided logistics, you see. We had some--I don't know what ship it was that took our troops to the Congo. Incidentally, our troops acquitted themselves very well indeed. We got a lot of praise from Dag Hammarskjöld, so much so that Dag Hammarskjöld made a request to our prime minister to supply a Malaysian to be the chief of staff. The prime minister very politely declined because he couldn't spare--we didn't have too many high ranking experienced officers, and we didn't want to take on that big responsibility. I remember too that at one stage when the people of some country were withdrawing their troops due to one reason and another, my prime minister wrote to Prime Minister Nehru a personal letter asking the Indian prime minister if he would consider joining this peace-keeping operation. I remember when I passed through New Delhi--as was my custom I always called on Prime Minister Nehru because he was a very close friend of my prime minister, Tunku; so when I had a conference in New Delhi or passing through New Delhi, I would call on him--on that occasion I called on Prime Minister Nehru, and in a brief conversation he told me, "Oh, yes, Tunku wrote to me. You can tell him I've decided to send a contingent to the Congo."

O'BRIEN: Yes.

ONG: Yes. Nehru told me that. It was a great fillip to the UN peace-keeping operation. Unfortunately, since after that, the experience was very hard on the Congo operation. We became short of funds. The UN had great difficulty completing those operations, and it was a most difficult operation. That is why they haven't had any more.

O'BRIEN: Well, in 1963, the deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Tun (Haji) Abdul Razak (bin Dato Hussain), makes a visit and talks to President Kennedy. Is this mainly over military things at that point, in the way of hardware?

ONG: No, I don't think. . . . No, he didn't come here for any--it was just a goodwill visit. He was concurrently minister of defense, and he was very well received by the then Secretary of Defense (Robert S.) McNamara. They hit it off very well. He paid a courtesy call on President Kennedy, but there was nothing of real substance that he discussed. We didn't ask for any military hardware or anything.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any inkling in late 1963, or any hint, that President Kennedy was considering a visit to Southeast Asia which would have included Malaysia on the itinerary?

ONG: No, no, none at all. Well, '62 he was involved in this Cuban missile crisis, the Berlin crisis, and all these crises, and domestically he had to try to push his legislative programs. He made a visit, I think, to

Europe, a couple of visits. No, I had no indication that he was planning to come out to that part of the world, at least to Malaysia. He may have planned to go to other countries in that area. I don't know, I was not aware of that.

O'BRIEN: Yes. Well, were you aware at this point--in 1962, '63--and did it concern you and did it concern the Tunku as well that there were people in the White House that took a very conciliatory view toward Sukarno? Robert Kennedy, for one.

ONG: Oh, yes, yes, yes. We were concerned that there were certain people who would, you know, try expediency rather than hold onto a good policy.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have much in the way of conversations with White House people, let's say, (Walt W.) Rostow or Robert Kennedy, at any time about Sukarno, about Southeast Asia--an attempt to just sound them out or tell them of the Malaysia point of view?

ONG: Oh, yes, but State Department mainly, State Department people. Well, they knew what Sukarno was up to, and I remember they were trying to keep a line to Sukarno despite all the insults. You remember they had Ambassador (Howard P.) Jones there. Every time I talked to people in the White House or State Department complaining about, you know, what Sukarno was doing and so on. . . . At the time, Sukarno was in the confrontation, was blowing hot, blowing cold, blowing hot. Usually, every time they would explain to me, "Oh, yes, Ambassador Jones has been to see Sukarno. Well, he didn't really mean what he said," and so on and so forth. Sukarno would play that kind of a game, telling the Americans, "No, no, I'm really not doing that sort of thing." So you didn't know what to believe. Sukarno was so volatile, and we just couldn't. . . . Of course, your administration then was trying to keep Sukarno from going too far over to the Communists. I mean, after all, through your diplomatic efforts, you managed to avoid a military confrontation over West Iran. There was all the Bangkok plan here, and it was all settled in '62. Apparently, the Russians at that time were very disappointed that the thing was settled peacefully. Was it Khrushchev then? Yes. They had supplied Sukarno with over a billion dollars in military hardware. You could see the pattern then, I think. Khrushchev was trying to stir up trouble out there and Cuba, you see, the buildup in Cuba, the buildup there, to create trouble, to get Sukarno to make war against the Dutch and so on, and that would involve probably Australia. So Khrushchev was trying to get some of these things started. When Sukarno settled the thing and the Dutch settled it through the good officers of the United States, it was my understanding that Khrushchev never forgave Sukarno.

O'BRIEN: Oh, is that right?

ONG: Then that drove Sukarno into the arms of Peking. It was at that time that Russia--the Soviet Union--and Communist China were breaking up. It was '59 they started to break up their love affair; so the PKI, the Communist party of Indonesia. . . . Even within the PKI there has been a great debate going on for a long time as to which of the communist giants they would support--which line. You see, after the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet line at least would say peaceful cooperation, peaceful coexistence. But Mao wasn't even going to say that. Mao would say, "Wars of national liberation: we've got to be aggressive, we've got to fight, we've got to push." And he didn't hide that policy at all. So it's a question of the militant aggressive policy of Peking, whether Indonesia should follow that--the Communist party of Indonesia--or follow the line of Moscow. Finally, the hard-liners won over, and then that got Sukarno into that mess. That probably is the best thing that happened in our part of the world, that the Communists in Indonesia were taken care of by the people in Indonesia themselves.

O'BRIEN: Well, in this--and this is really an administrative kind of question--you have two channels here, as all nations have: an ambassador in Kuala Lumpur and an ambassador in Washington.

ONG: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Now is there a division of labor there? Are there certain things in the way of diplomatic relations between the United States and Malaysia that you handle on your end and Ambassador (Charles F.) Baldwin perhaps handled on his, or do you pretty much overlap?

ONG: Well, there is no hard-and-fast arrangement. In fact, there's no arrangement at all, that who is to deal with what. It's just we deal with it as it comes up, you see. Trouble, sometimes we do it both in K.L. (Kuala Lumpur) and here. If there's a problem, probably we talk to the American ambassador in K.L. and I talk to the administration people here. It's a two-way approach. Of course, as friendly countries with so much in common, our job--my job here, the American ambassador's job in K.L.--is to promote better relations, more meaningful relations in trade and other matters, and to seek wherever we could cooperate in the interests of world peace, in the interests of UN objectives and other worthwhile objectives promoting world peace and security. Happily a lot of our thinking along the parallel lines. . . . As I said, the only trouble, some things are stockpiled. We could have that amount of genuine goodwill and concern for each other's well-being. You could in course of time achieve your objective of disposing the stockpile without causing undue depression of the market because if you sell your things at a low price, depressed market, you get less money.

O'BRIEN: That's right.

ONG: You're just giving it away. It's so obvious, as I said. We sell rubber, for example . . .

O'BRIEN: Rubber is similar.

ONG: Yes, rubber is a similar problem. You see, Malaysia produces more than 45 percent of the world's natural rubber. Together with Indonesia and Thailand in that region alone, these three countries produce, what, 90 percent of the world's natural rubber. For every cent drop in the price, we suffer a colossal loss in export earnings, in taxes, and so on. The communist countries--Soviet Union, Eastern Europe--are big customers. In fact, volumewise the consumption of natural rubber by the United States has been at a standstill for several years. You consume the same volume, but your total rubber consumption has gone up, and you use more and more synthetics in proportion. So the rubber sales to Eastern Europe and to Red China is quite substantial--very substantial in fact. So if through American action the price drops, then you're only just taking money from our pockets and giving it to Peking and Moscow and the others. I think it's obvious that if that is well realized, you won't do it. You may get it cheaper. So again, you see, people can make propaganda. The Chinese Communists make it easy--look here, we come and buy, the price goes up because rubber market, tin market very sensitive. When the Chinese come to buy, the price goes up. Here the Americans sell the stockpile, the price goes down. Who are our friends and who are our--you see?

O'BRIEN: Well, you mentioned in our conversation over the phone that you were involved in a luncheon in New York on the day that President Kennedy was assassinated. I wonder if you might go into that and some of the reactions of the diplomats?

ONG: Yes. It so happened on that day I was hosting a luncheon--I think there were at least more than twenty ambassadors in the UN--at the Waldorf-Astoria. Just as we were having our main course, a waiter came and whispered to me and said, "President Kennedy has been assassinated." Needless to say, it was a great shock, but I maintained my cool. I signaled to one of my officials at the other side of the table. He came around to me and I said, "Look, this waiter just whispered to me this awful message. Can you check if there's any truth in it?" He went out, but before he could come back, the head waiter came and said, "It's true. He's been critically wounded. They've already sent for the priest." Somehow I took that man's word as true, so I passed the word around the table quietly. Everybody registered shock. We just laid down our fork and we just left the table--complete silence, not a word. Everybody looked at each other. Not a word was spoken. They just left, and everyone then shook hands with me. We didn't say anything. Then my aide came and said, yes, the radio had confirmed. We all walked out of that place quietly, and I walked back to my office which is just very close to the Waldorf. I could see people weeping in the streets. We didn't know who was responsible for the assassination, what it was all about. We listened to the radio, then I closed my office, and I thought, "Oh dear, it's dark; I'd better get home. We don't know what is happening." I rushed to the airport, took the shuttle back to Washington, because it was a great shock. You know, we were having dinner two nights before that, and--who was that?--I can't recall the name, but he was a congressman from Texas and he did tell me that they were very worried about President Kennedy going to Texas. The atmosphere was very bad.

O'BRIEN: Yes. It was probably Henry Gonzalez?

ONG: No. I can't remember now. The couple was telling us, "Yes, we are going to Texas tomorrow because the president will be going down--going to Dallas--and we shall be meeting them, but we're not at all happy that he should go."

O'BRIEN: Well, Mr. Ambassador, I don't have any more prepared questions. I noticed you do have some various telegrams and papers. Is there something that you'd like to interject?

ONG: No, no, I was just trying to refer to--no, that's not the one. No, I was looking for the actual text of the statement by President Kennedy on the formation of Malaysia.

O'BRIEN: Oh, I'll tell you what I can do. I have that, I have a copy of the press conferences, and I can just have that submitted into the transcript at the proper place.[1] How's that?

ONG: Yes, at your work. I think it's January.

O'BRIEN: Yes, I was looking at it the other day. I believe it was January. Is there anything else you would like to add here at this point, anything that we haven't covered that comes to memory? One thing I might ask at this point is, do you detect any change in policy or any change in relations between the United States and Malaysia--perhaps vis-à-vis Indonesia--under President Johnson?

ONG: Basically no. It was obvious that the United States. . . . I think the farthest it would go was that statement by President Kennedy that they support Malaysia diplomatically. In the UN they supported us all the way. In the Security Council, when we made an official complaint against Indonesia for dropping paratroopers, the United States voted for a resolution critical of Indonesia's action, and all the way diplomatically and so on they were. . . . No, but, of course, you could understand that the United States would want to keep a line and try not to alienate Indonesia any more than is necessary, try to keep a line, and probably that has paid off. By keeping a line there, by turning the other cheek to all this spitting and burning of your embassy and your libraries and so on, you stuck it out.

Marshall Green was telling me a story. I remember when they decided to send Marshall Green out as ambassador. I told Marshall I would like to give him and his wife a farewell party in my house, but I knew what a delicate mission he had to perform and I didn't want to embarrass him, so it would be a very quiet, private affair. We would bring a few friends, invite a few of our very close friends. It was a very secret dinner; we didn't want to embarrass him. I remember Marshall Green telling me that when he presented his credentials to President Sukarno, he let off a diatribe against the United States, against Marshall Green, and was rude. Marshall stood there and took it all on the chin. So as is customary, I believe, after presentation of credentials, there would be a little reception. The people would come in, some of the cabinet and so on. There was this Madame Supeni, who was deputy foreign minister to (Dr.) Subandrio.[2] I met her many times; she's been to Malaysia; I met her many times in the United Nations, very able woman of not inconsiderable charm. So Mrs. Supeni walked up. Marshall Green talked to Mrs. Supeni, "Madame, I was so struck by your charm that I didn't hear a single word of what the president was saying. Could you tell me what he said?" And Sukarno heard that. He burst out laughing, and that broke the tension. That's the presence of mind of a good diplomat--Marshall Green.

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[1] See Appendix A.

[2] Mrs. Supeni's official title was second assistant to the foreign minister.

O'BRIEN: Well, that's a very good story. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador, for a very informative and, I think, very interesting interview.

APPENDIX A

From President Kennedy's News Conference of February 14, 1963:

Q. Mr. President, you spoke of dangers in other areas. Do you consider dangers developing in Southeast Asia as a result of the proposed formation of Malaysia? This is Britain relinquishing her colonial ties.

A. THE PRESIDENT. That is correct. We have supported the Malaysia Confederation, and it's under pressure from several areas. But I'm hopeful it will sustain itself, because it's the best hope of security for that very vital part of the world.