Llewellyn E. Thompson Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 04/27/1966
Administrative Information

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Llewellyn E. Thompson served as Ambassador to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1957 - 1962) and as US Ambassador-at-large (1962 - 1966). This interview focuses on the limited test ban treaty, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and communications between John F. Kennedy [JFK] and Chairman Khrushchev, among other issues.

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By Llewellyn E. Thompson

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, Llewellyn E. Thompson, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a transcript of a personal statement approved by me on September 18, 1964, and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this document is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

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APPENDIX A

GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT

By Llewellyn E. Thompson

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with paragraph 3 of the Gift of Personal Statement signed by me on September 18, 1964 and accepted by the Archivist of the United States on January 28, 1965, it is my wish to exercise my option to revise the stipulation governing access to my oral history interview for research. The original Gift of Personal Statement is altered to include the following restrictions:

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Signed Llewellyn E. Thompson

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Archivist of the United States

Date March 18, 1971

Llewellyn E. Thompson — JFK #2
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Oral History Interview

with

LLEWELLYN E. THOMPSON

April 27, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Ambassador, Arthur Schlesinger credits you with the formulation of the idea of the limited test ban. I wonder if you would comment on that.

THOMPSON: I would have to look up my messages from Moscow to see whether in fact I did -- I think I did -- recommend this as a policy. I'm not at all sure that I did. But what I do recall is that shortly before Ambassador Dobrynin [Anatoly F. Dobrynin] returned to the

Soviet Union for consultation or leave, I had a meal alone with him and pressed him very hard on why the Soviets had not taken up our offer of a limited test ban. I said I thought that this was really in our mutual interests; that never seemed to have seriously considered it, and I was at loss to know why. I drew him out a bit, and he showed considerable interest. One of his main questions was whether or not I thought that in the event we concluded such an agreement, it would be ratified by the Senate. I said that I was convinced that if the President were behind it, the Senate would go along. I thought his question indicate that there was a chance of serious consideration, and I reported this to Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk] who, a day or two later, took the Ambassador out on the boat he had on the Potomac, and he

pursued the question with him further. I am myself convinced that it was Dobrynin's report to Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] which caused the Soviets to reverse their position. I have never pinned him down on this, and it's probable that Khrushchev himself about this time, probably because of the deterioration of their relations with Communist China, was ready for this. But I do think that Dobrynin's report probably helped him focus on this at that time. Whether or not I had originally put forward this, I frankly don't recall. There have been so many of these ideas tossed back and forth that I'd have to consult the cables to see whether or not in fact I did do so.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I didn't want to ask you something that could be found by future historians in your cables, but I was very interested in this particular point because I had found

some dispute as to where the idea originated.

In July, 1962, Arthus Dean, in Geneva, let slip the idea that we might be willing to reduce the number of inspections that we were requiring for…. This was in connection with a comprehensive test ban, of course, not a limited test ban. I've heard it reported that front his leak came some very involved discussion in the United States. President Kennedy was upset by this leak and decided that we'd better discuss it thoroughly or investigate it thoroughly to determine just exactly what our position was. From these discussions came the idea of suggesting to the Soviet Union a limited test ban, which eventually came in 1963. Do you have any comments to make on that? You've already given some ideas as to where this idea came, or how this process was accomplished, but I wonder if you have any comments on how this leak

of Arthur Dean's fitted in, or whether specific discussion in 1962 did contribute to this idea that you can recall.

THOMPSON: I think the only comment I could make is that I do believe the Soviets were misled, and probably thought it was deliberate, that we would accept a very limited number of inspections. And they may, I suspect, even still think that this was deliberate which, of course, it was not. I have myself always felt that a very small number, such as three, would be adequate because I did not think that the Soviets would run the risk of exposure even if we had a very, very small number. But I was not in Washington at that time so I don't have any knowledge of the discussion that went on here.

O'CONNOR: Yes, that was just before you got to Washington, really, and I wondered if

the discussions had been carried on after you came back, and I thought perhaps you might

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have been involved in some of them.

THOMPSON: I was only peripherally involved in that.

O'CONNOR: There are often listed several steps that led, more or less directly, to the question of a limited test ban or the negotiations that were carried on in Moscow. I wondered where in these steps, or where in this process, you became directly involved. I wondered, for instance, if you were concerned at all with the American University speech?

THOMPSON: Yes, I was actually in California at the time for some talks at Western universities, and I was called from Washington. I don't recall by whom, whether it was someone in the White House -- I rather think it was Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], but I'm not sure. He read me key passages and asked my views. I heartily supported the idea of the speech, the general tenor of it, but I was not involved in the detailed drafting. I made

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one or two suggestions over the telephone, minor drafting suggestions, but I agreed fully with the general tenor of the speech. I think a lot of these things grow out of continued discussion that develops over a time, and a lot of the ideas that get into things of that sort are very often a long time in developing.

O'CONNOR: One other thing that is sometimes said to have hastened the beginning of negotiations were leaks and rumors from England that Khrushchev had talked to Harold Wilson and had told him that he might consider a limited test ban. Do you recall anything about that or can you verify any of those?

THOMPSON: No, I don't.

O'CONNOR: I thought perhaps somebody might have asked you about those. Well, there was surprise in some quarters that you were not chosen to head the delegation in Moscow that did

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the negotiating -- you yourself were not chosen. Do you have any comments on that?

THOMPSON: No, I don't…. What was the date of this? Do you recall that?

O'CONNOR: The date that…

THOMPSON: Of the negotiations?

O'CONNOR: Well, July, 1963.

THOMPSON: No, I think in some ways it's rather awkward for an ambassador to return -- it's awkward for his successor for an ambassador to return on a special mission of that sort. This might have played a role in it. But with Mr. Harriman's [W. Averell Harriman] experience, I think it was quite natural that he was selected.

O'CONNOR: That's the thing that I thought curious. Mr. Harriman's experience is very often given as the reason, and yet his experience is certainly no greater than yours. That was actually one of the sources of that

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question. I wondered how strong was the hope on your part or, so far as you could tell, here in the State Department when the Harriman mission left for Moscow. How strong was the hope that a limited test ban might be accomplished, or that something might be accomplished? Was there much optimism?

THOMPSON: I'd find it hard to say what the general consensus was, but I do recall telling Mr. Harriman that I was convinced that he would get an agreement. This great out partly of my conversation with the Ambassador here -- Dobrynin -- that had convinced me that they were serious about it.

O'CONNOR: Well, practically the first thing mentioned when Ambassador Harriman got to Moscow was when Chairman Khrushchev said that he would not hear of a comprehensive ban. He would not consider any longer even two

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or three on-site inspections. Why do you think he reduced his position from two or three to zero?

THOMPSON: I would suspect that the Soviet military were very much opposed to this; that at the time he'd indicated that he would accept three, he had probably stirred up a great deal of opposition. Mr. Khrushchev's position -- as later became evident when he was dropped -- was not always completely secure, and I think he probably yielded to military pressure on this point. And it's not only military, there are other

elements in the Soviet Union that object to any kind of inspection within the country, particularly the members of the Party.

O'CONNOR: Well, Schlesinger says that Ambassador Harriman offered as our first offering a non-proliferation treaty -- a treaty forbidding

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the transfer of nuclear weapons from one country to another -- and he says Khrushchev rejected this. I didn't come across this in any of the research that I had done. I couldn't get it from anyone else, and I wondered if you remembered whether this was actually so or not?

THOMPSON: No, I have no recollection of that.

O'CONNOR: I had never come across that, and I wondered if you could remember. Well, another thing. China played a very important part in our dealings with the Soviet Union in Moscow. John F. Kennedy communicated to Harriman in Moscow that China was actually more important than Khrushchev let on, to Khrushchev, and that Harriman should press it. In other words, press an attempt to get the Soviet Union to force China or to try to force China to agree to a limited test ban, something of that sort. In other

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words, to involve China. I wondered if that was John F. Kennedy's own feelings -- I mean the importance of China -- I wondered if that was his own feeling or that was the result of some advice given to him by you or by somebody else.

THOMPSON: Well, I know that this subject has always been very much on Mr. Harriman's mind. I think he was probably the one that pushed this. He's always felt -- I felt he was wrong -- that Khrushchev could be brought to discuss China. Based on my own experience, I didn't think this was so. But I would suspect that Mr. Harriman may have discussed this with President Kennedy and suggested himself that this be done.

O'CONNOR: You did say that you thought China played an important role in getting Khrushchev to change his mind toward a limited test ban.

THOMPSON: Well, I think that the Soviet relations with

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China had probably been an impediment to his earlier doing this, but as their relations deteriorated, he probably then decided he didn't care what they thought about it.

O'CONNOR: But you didn't feel that he was willing to discuss this with him?

THOMPSON: The Chinese obviously were opposed to this. It was bound to have an effect on Chinese Communist relations with the Soviet Union.

O'CONNOR: John F. Kennedy also told Harriman -- and this is a rather strange question -- to elicit Khrushchev's view of means of limiting or preventing Chinese nuclear development and to find out whether Khrushchev was willing to take Soviet action or to accept United States action designed toward this end. Did you ever hear John F. Kennedy talk about that, or do you know why he might suggest that?

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THOMPSON: No, I don't.

O'CONNOR: It sounds like he was considering -- perhaps not realistically considering but at least wanting to have some discussion on -- the possibility of United States-Soviet cooperation or unilateral action on the part of the Soviet Union or the United States to curtail Chinese nuclear development. You never heard him talk about that in private, or anything?

THOMPSON: I don't clearly recall discussing this directly with the President. I know that I did suggest in various discussions around here, and it could've been with the President as well, that it was conceivable that the Soviets might tell the Chinese, "Don't do this or else," and that this shouldn't be ruled out as a possibility. In other words, if the Chinese started to develop the capability, the Soviets might act against it. But I don't myself recall

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whether there was specifically a conversation with the President on this directly.

O'CONNOR: Okay. Two major points of disagreement that were brought up during the negotiations were the peaceful uses clause and the withdrawal clause. The Soviet Union was opposed to both of them, and the United States decided that the withdrawal clause was an indispensable element to the treaty and we decided to trade peaceful uses clause, which we also wanted, for a withdrawal clause. Do you have any comments on the decision that one was more important than the other?

THOMPSON: Oh, I think our decision was sound, that the withdrawal clause was more

essential. Of course, there are indications that the Soviets have since changed their mind about peaceful uses. But they're highly suspicious, and I think they probably thought this was

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a means by which we might try to evade the treaty.

O'CONNOR: Do you know who was responsible for this decision concerning these two particular clauses? Now you were one of the six people, I believe, reading the cables coming back from Moscow, and you must have been involved in the discussion of practically all the items of the treaty, or at least I would imagine.

THOMPSON: Yes. The way these things normally work, I would see cables and would chime in whenever I had an observation to make. But I don't recall any on these particular things.

O'CONNOR: Were these cables coming back and going directly to, perhaps, Dean Rusk or directly to John F. Kennedy? Who was really making the decision? These are rather technical matters, a lot of them.

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THOMPSON: Well, this was a matter that was handled largely…. The responsibility for drafting was in the disarmament section, and I suppose that they were the ones who were actually handling it.

O'CONNOR: Okay. I've heard that we were not very secure on the question of peaceful uses, that we hadn't really made up our minds. Do you have any comments on that?

THOMPSON: Well, there's still a great division of opinion in the government on this. I personally have been very much in favor of at least a thorough investigation as to what the possibilities are. A lot of this is very highly technical, and there are disputes and disagreement among the technicians as to what the benefits and possibilities really are. Of course, there are many people who consider that peaceful uses can be a cover for countries going

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nuclear that are doing so. I doubt, myself, if this is very real, but there is genuine concern on the part of some people about it.

O'CONNOR: It is said that the decision to absolutely demand the withdrawal clause, or

to state our position as strongly as we possibly could that we needed a withdrawal clause, was for domestic political reasons. Do you have any comments on that, or do you recall whether or not that was one of the sources of the reason?

THOMPSON: I don't really recall the nature of that discussion.

O'CONNOR: All right. Let's see. Another matter of disagreement which threatened for a time to prevent signing of the test ban treaty was the Soviet position on a non-aggression pact. Do you have any comments on that?

THOMPSON: Well, I felt, and believe so expressed myself here, that it was not necessary to

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give in to the Soviets on this point. Mr. Harriman went part way in at least undertaking that he would do his best, and I believe he implied that the government would, which I believe was a little bit beyond his instructions. But I felt quite strongly, and a number of others did, that this was an unnecessary concession on our part.

O'CONNOR: Well, in Ambassador Harriman's instructions there was the point made that no non-aggression pact could be signed -- or we would be party to no non-aggression pact -- which recognized East Germany or precluded future reunification of Germany. But, within these limitations, the instructions said, in effect, that a non-aggression pact might be advantageous to the West by reducing the possibility of more Berlin crises.

THOMPSON: Well, I believe the key point here was if

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the Berlin question could be dealt with, this would entirely change their attitude. The Soviets were unwilling to combine this with a statement that this in no way affected Berlin. One of our chief objections to it was that by implication this would weaken our defense posture in Berlin.

O'CONNOR: Were you the source really of suggesting this; that the key question regarding a non-aggression pact was whether or not we could also get at the same time a statement on Berlin, or an agreement on Berlin, regarding access routes for example?

THOMPSON: No, I don't think that I…. Like most of these things, there's fairly wide discussion around the Department.

O'CONNOR: But I knew you'd been involved in the Berlin question before that.

THOMPSON: Yes, and I'd expressed myself on this many times in many places.

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O'CONNOR: Was there any inclination on the part of a non-aggression pact among the people that were reading the cables?

THOMPSON: I think very little, actually.

O'CONNOR: Okay. You said you did chime in on some things as the cables came back from Moscow, some questions that arose. I wondered if you could remember any specific issues that you particularly commented on.

THOMPSON: No, I think I'd have to refresh my memory by looking at the cables. I don't…

O'CONNOR: I don't suppose many memos were written of the conversations regarding this.

THOMPSON: No, on this kind of thing it's normally not done in writing.

O'CONNOR: Okay. One final thing we might go into. You were a member of the delegation which went to Moscow to sign the treaty, and I wondered if you had any comments or memories of that.

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THOMPSON: Well, there was very little bearing on the treaty that came up there, other than what's in the public record from the speeches. The most important thing there was the Secretary's talk with Mr. Khrushchev on the Black Sea. But the treaty itself had already been signed so this wasn't really an important subject of discussion.

O'CONNOR: Okay, fine. We can go on to one other thing. There are another couple of things I'd like to ask you about. You were at the Vienna meeting in 1961 between Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy. I believe it was you who had urged this meeting. Do you have any comments on that, or do you recall your reasoning behind urging a face to face meeting?

THOMPSON: Yes. I felt quite strongly that you can't convey in cables the nature of the problem with a person like Khrushchev, that

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very complex character. It's just, I think, impossible to enable another person to hedge him just on the basis of written reports. I felt that the chief advantage of it was to enable the President himself, directly, to appraise Mr. Khrushchev. And vice versa. Afterwards the President used to tease me about this quite often saying, "Well, you were the fellow that urged this meeting. And that didn't come off very well." But then he also admitted that it had been valuable to him just to get to know Khrushchev, to know what he was like. I think, in retrospect, I'm sorry in a way that the discussion got off on ideological grounds -- which is something I don't think that the President quite appreciated the fact that a Communist like Mr. Khrushchev could not yield on even if he wanted to. I mean he couldn't formally deny his own ideology.

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I think it was unfortunate that the dialogue started on that basis. There hasn't been worked out any very clear scenario in advance. Had I realized it, it wouldn't have gotten so much on this basis. What, in effect, the President proposed was that neither side try to upset the balance of power. Khrushchev pointed out this is scarcely consistent with Communist hopes and ambitions and their beliefs that it was inevitable that this would be upset simply by the fact that in their view Communism was inevitable throughout the world.

O'CONNOR: You have been quoted as saying -- no, you have been reported as saying, let's put it that way -- by A. Schlesinger that John F. Kennedy overreacted in this particular discussion with Khrushchev. More specifically, I guess, it was a question of Berlin rather than over this question of the status quo remaining.

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THOMPSON: No, I don't think that's correct except in the sense that I don't think he fully appreciated this point I've just made about the inability of Khrushchev to agree to something which would have been contrary to what all the Communists believe in. But on the threatening attitude of Khrushchev over Berlin I think it was very sound of the President to react the way he did. I think this had a very important effect on Khrushchev.

O'CONNOR: He reacted very firmly, not quite angrily I suppose, but then…

THOMPSON: No. It was more in sorrow than in anger. But I think it was absolutely essential that he show firmness. Otherwise it could have been very dangerous indeed.

O'CONNOR: The implication in Schlesinger's book in your saying that he overreacted was that he really didn't handle himself very well; John F. Kennedy didn't

really handle himself

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very well in the Vienna meeting. And apparently you wouldn't go along with that?

THOMPSON: No, I wouldn't.

O'CONNOR: You feel this is a misinterpretation of your views?

THOMPSON: Yes. Apart from this one point, I think the President handled the thing exceedingly well. I think he made a great impression on Mr. Khrushchev.

O'CONNOR: I was going to ask you were there any things that wouldn't really be in your cables that you might comment on about Khrushchev's reactions, or the effect this meeting had on Khrushchev?

THOMPSON: Well, he made quite clear that he, in a way, envied the President. At that time it looked as though he had many years ahead of him, he envied his youth. And, as I say, I think he quite respected his ability and his grasp of these questions. President Kennedy had spent a lot of time discussing

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with me and other Soviet affairs. And he had done a lot of reading and was, I think, quite knowledgeable. I imagine this impressed Khrushchev.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we can get into another major thing you were involved in. This has been discussed very thoroughly, or written about very thoroughly, in Elie Abel's book [*The Cuban Missile Crisis*]. The thing I'm getting to is the Cuban Missile Crisis. I wonder if you ever had time to read that book and whether you had any disagreement with any of the particular things you read in that book?

THOMPSON: Yes, I went through it very quickly. I didn't read it very thoroughly. But in general I think it was, as far as it went, a fairly good and balanced account. I talked to him some about it.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I gathered that.

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THOMPSON: And others did. Mr. Ball [George W. Ball] and I saw him together several times.

O'CONNOR: I wondered how you happened to be brought into the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, the committee that really handled the Cuban Missile Crisis.

THOMPSON: Well, I think this was almost entirely due to the President. I had had a long series of briefings for him when he first came into office. I think I spent something like eight hours during my first period of consultation back here -- or a total of eight. And I think at the time of this crisis what the President wanted was people whose views he wanted and not some just formal group on which there were people who theoretically were concerned, but whom he didn't necessarily think would contribute to the discussion.

O'CONNOR: Well, apparently your personal relationship

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with the President grew increasingly more close, really, during the Presidency. Is that true?

THOMPSON: Yes. This sometimes had problems because he would quite often ring me up either at home or here and ask my opinion about something which I did not have time to reflect on or to discuss with the Secretary. The Secretary quite understood this. I talked to him several times and asked him if he wanted me to express my views on these things, and he said, "By all means." But it was sort of a heavy responsibility. I mean, the President's mind operated so quickly, and he was impatient with people who were slow. So you had to go into high gear sometimes to think in giving a quick opinion on something. But Kennedy was a great pleasure to work with.

O'CONNOR: Elie Abel comments on the difference between the way the Executive Committee functioned

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with John F. Kennedy present and the way it functioned with John F. Kennedy absent. I wonder if you would care to comment on that. Do you feel there was a difference?

THOMPSON: Well, obviously, if you're kicking around a problem without the President there, you can express yourself more freely. I think everyone on the committee was very conscious of the heavy responsibility the President had and, therefore, thought very carefully about what they said. Whereas, when you're discussing it just in a group, you can sound off without the same feeling of responsibility just to explore the question. There was a great deal of discussion simply to try to illustrate all aspects and facets of the problem. And Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] particularly

used this technique of sometimes being the devil's advocate just to try to bring out what all the facts were. One

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thing I'm not sure I put in my previous statement which impressed me very much was that the President was out of the room one day, and we were discussing a paper three or four pages long. And after about a half hour's discussion or more, we arrived at a certain consensus about it. The President came back in the room and glanced at this and turned the pages so fast that it seemed difficult that he could actually be reading it and then said, "Well, gentlemen, I think so and so," and came out with exactly the same conclusion we'd reached after a half hour's intense discussion.

O'CONNOR: That would be pretty impressive. Did he make any particular effort to get everybody's opinion? Can you comment on that? Yours in particular I'm concerned with -- your opinion in particular.

THOMPSON: Oh yes, he would very often call on people

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by name and ask what they thought about a given thing. I remember he once asked me what would the Soviets do if we instituted a blockade. I recall replying that they would probably send on ship through to test us out, which is, of course, exactly what they did.

O'CONNOR: There were reports also, and Elie Abel mentions this, that Robert F. Kennedy irritated some people in these meetings, offended others. And I wondered if you had any comments on that; whether he ever offended you, or whether you could understand how some other people might have been offended?

THOMPSON: Well, he certainly never offended me. I think he performed a great service, as I said, in deliberately bringing out all of the bugs in a given course of action and making sure that every possibility was looked at. But no, I think this was a remarkable

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thing in which the people who had formed strong opinions nevertheless wanted to be sure that facts contrary to their opinions had been understood. I thought this was very commendable.

O'CONNOR: Do you know of anyone in particular in that committee that you would say exerted the most influence or the greatest influence on the President?

THOMPSON: I have no way of judging that. Of course, Bobby Kennedy was very close to him and I suppose was the most important…

O'CONNOR: I wondered if anyone particularly dominated the sessions more frequently than others.

THOMPSON: Very hard to say.

O'CONNOR: Would you comment on the value of the information that had been acquired through Penkovsky [Colonel Oleg Penkovsky] on making a decision regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis? Did this play an important role or not?

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THOMPSON: I don't think that it had very much importance.

O'CONNOR: I've heard several people comment that this was crucial in enabling us to make the decision; that it was extraordinary that we were able to make the decision with the satellite reconnaissance, not necessarily satellite reconnaissance, but the intelligence from various sources that we did have, Penkovsky being one of the major sources.

THOMPSON: I don't myself think this played a very great role; it may have in affecting some people. I think at that time there wasn't enough known about his reliability.

O'CONNOR: Well, a few other things, and we can wind this up. Sources have credited you -- Elie Abel being one and somebody else, Schlesinger, probably, and Sorensen -- with pointing out the need for the OAS [Organization of American States] approval and maintained that you said this would appear

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very important in the eyes of the Soviets.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's true.

O'CONNOR: Can you add anything to that, or do you have any comments about that?

THOMPSON: I've always been struck by how much importance the Soviets do attach to at least some cover of legality to things that they do. And, I think,

obviously, they always have tried to manipulate them and exploit public opinion. And I think the fact that this had endorsement of the Latin American countries put an entirely different problem for them. I wouldn't doubt it. If they could isolate the United States and mobilize world opinion against us, why, this would have been very important and, therefore, would have affected their judgment about what they could and couldn't do. I think another very important thing in the whole Cuban Crisis, which….

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I suppose, certainly in the sense of being opposed to a sudden air strike against these missiles, that I was a dove, but I also felt that it was very important that we be cranked up for an invasion. And this was certainly known to the Soviets that we were. I think it was the combination of the two -- our restraint, on the one hand, by using the blockade rather than actual attack combined with the fact that we were ready if need be was the key combination.

O'CONNOR: This idea of readiness in the Cuban Missile Crisis reminds me of another instance where people have said that oru readiness played a very important role and that was in the crisis in Laos in 1961. Our troops were put into Thailand. No one really wanted those troops to move from Thailand into Laos. It was hoped that the threat

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of the troops there would play an important role. Do you have any comments to make on that? You were in the Soviet Union at that time.

THOMPSON: Yes, and that's the reason I don't really have much to say about it.

O'CONNOR: I thought maybe you would know whether or not this played an important role as far as Khruschev was concerned.

THOMPSON: No, I had no way there of judging that except general knowledge.

O'CONNOR: Okay, one other question about the Cuban Missile Crisis. This deals with Khrushchev's -- I believe it was his second -- letter, written during that period that's reported as showing signs of real fright under the strain of this crisis. Historians can make up their own minds in the future as to whether or not the language of this letter, if it ever is published, does indicate this,

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but I wanted your opinion because I thought perhaps you had seen it.

THOMPSON: Yes. I think this probably was something that Khrushchev, under strain,

had dictated and written. It certainly sounded -- it had all the earmarks of his doing it personally. We know that Khrushchev normally did not himself dictate his messages. He would talk in front of his colleagues, and then someone would write up his ideas. And then he would make changes or okay it. But this had all the earmarks of having been directly dictated by him -- and probably under circumstances in which no one was able to change it or polish it or modify it. I think that he obviously was, and should have been, very much worried and probably had been under considerable strain.

O'CONNOR: Another couple of questions here. In 1963 a matter that you were involved in was,

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again, a Berlin crisis when you met with Dean Rusk and John F. Kennedy, and perhaps some others because the United States convoy was being blocked by Soviet armor. Do you have any memories of that particular meeting or of that particular question, the crisis as it appeared at that time? That was in early November.

THOMPSON: Yes. In all these matters it's a very difficult and delicate question because you have to, on the one hand, show firmness and resolve; and on the other, you have to be careful that you don't engage either the prestige personally of Khrushchev or of the Soviets in general by appearing to be threatening. And this is very difficult and requires a very delicate touch to get exactly the right combination of both. They react very strongly, and it can be very dangerous if you threaten them particularly

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and directly and in the wrong way. On the other hand, if you show signs of weakness, they will simply push further. And, therefore, it's a very tricky business. You have to leave them a possible way out in a kind of confrontation of this sort. On the other hand, in doing that you have to be careful that you don't lead them to think they have it made.

O'CONNOR: You were involved in the major Berlin crisis in 1961 and again involved in this one. I wondered if you could comment at all on the difference in John Kennedy's attitude and perhaps the maturing ability to handle a diplomatic crisis -- whether or not you thought that was so, or it was evident to you.

THOMPSON: Well, I was in Moscow in '61 and back here, of course, in '63. And I don't really have much basis there for a comparison.

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But I do think the President showed great skill and feeling in the kinds of things I was talking about -- not wanting to show weakness, but at the same time trying to take account of the other man's point of view.

O'CONNOR: Also in 1963, you were a guest of John Kennedy's at Hyannis Port with General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor]. Was that just a social call or did that have some specific problems in mind?

THOMPSON: No. We had some business to discuss, but the main purpose of that meeting, in which I was very little involved, was the budget.

O'CONNOR: I see. You weren't called up there for the budget?

THOMPSON: No. I've forgotten what the exact thing we were discussing was.

O'CONNOR: That's about all the questions I have unless you have something else that you could

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comment on about some things that you were involved in during the Kennedy Administration. I was trying to avoid some of the things that you might have written back from Moscow about because they would be available.

THOMPSON: There was one thing in connection with this Berlin crisis that I'm not sure that I've mentioned before. And that was what we had some disagreement on how we should convey our message to the Soviets on the blocking of these convoys. We had, of course, to work this out with our French and British allies. And we had finally reached an agreement with them on how we would handle it. The President wanted to handle it in a different way by, as I recall, handling it on a higher political level, whereas, we'd reached agreement with the British and French to do it on the military level -- quite a bit lower down.

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I, having in mind the importance of carrying our allies with us and the need to act quickly, persuaded the President to change his mind and go ahead on the military level. And afterwards, when we had had considerable trouble because of the way this was handled, the President asked me if I still felt that was the right way to have done it. And I replied rather quickly that I still thought that was right. But in thinking about it afterwards, I rather concluded that probably the President had been right. And this is the only case in which I know that we had any disagreement about anything. And in that case he had been right, and I probably was wrong.

O'CONNOR: I was amazed to hear you say earlier that you were very much impressed with his knowledge of the Soviet Union.

THOMPSON: He had read a great deal about it. As I

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say, he had picked my brains until there was nothing left -- and that of others. I think, in fact, as President he probably spent too much time on this because he could only do this to the neglect of other things. And he got too much into detail. considering his other responsibilities. But it was a great satisfaction to me to discuss and make recommendations because I always felt that, in the event my own judgment was wrong, he probably would have spotted it. And I think he had developed a real feel for the problems.

O'CONNOR: He had an extra-State Department, or outside the State Department, connection with the Soviet Union, with Khrushchev. In fact, he had several of them, really. The Khrushchev-Kennedy letters is one famous example of it. Also the very fact of sending Harriman to Moscow instead of using

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the Ambassador in Moscow to negotiate this particular treaty. I wonder if you have any comments on that. That's a tactic, or a policy -- a strategy -- that Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] used to use all the time, and it irritated Secretary Hull [Cordell Hull] irritated many other people in the Department of State.

THOMPSON: Well, I think there's a difference between those two things. I think in a foreign negotiation such as the test ban, it probably is sound and normal practice to send a special negotiator for a thing of that sort because of the involved background and political aspects at home and so on. And in some ways it's a protection for the Ambassador not, himself, to be involved in this kind of a negotiation. On the other hand, I think that it was an illusion and, in a sense, an error of judgment to use

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private contacts which the Soviets have exploited with a lot of people. They tried to sell the idea: "Well, the State Department is so biased against us that we can't get anywhere. If we could just get direct contact, why we could do this." This way they hoped to avoid any staff work and to avoid having all the facts known, and to persuade the President to make a judgement simply on the basis of their presentation on the assumption that they could do business that way. And I think this was a great mistake. And I think the President eventually came to realize this.

O'CONNOR: You weren't instrumental at all then in setting up this direct communication?

THOMPSON: I was involved.

O'CONNOR: I knew you were involved in it, but I wondered …. It sounds now as though you really were not too favorable toward the idea.

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THOMPSON: Well, again, I'd make a distinction between the letters and some of the contacts and informal exchanges that were oral rather than written.

O'CONNOR: Could you tell us a little bit briefly before we end about how this communication was begun -- what role did you play in these written communications between Khrushchev and Kennedy?

THOMPSON: Well, I take it this record is not for use for…

O'CONNOR: Yes. You can put any restriction you want on this. This can be restricted for twenty-five or thirty years if you want.

THOMPSON: As matters worked out on the written exchanges, in most cases the normal procedure was that I would make the first draft of these exchanges. They would be shown to the Secretary, and he might make changes; then to Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy]; and, eventually,

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then go to the President who himself might make changes. Sometimes a draft would be prepared in the White House and sent over here. But for the most of them, the initial draft was made here. And I was usually the one that did it. We held these very closely, and only two or three of us here ever knew about them. This was, at least, from the time I came on board. And I think this shows that the President had realized that these were kinds of things in which it was unwise to operate -- and I don't think he did -- without the knowledge of the Secretary and the resources of the Department. I'm sure that he knew all of the facts.

O'CONNOR: Were you involved at all in the beginning of this communication between the two, or do you know how it began?

THOMPSON: I don't offhand recall the first exchange

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or just exactly how it started.

O'CONNOR: Okay, we can wind it up with that much, unless you have any other comments.

[END OF INTERVIEW]