Joseph J. Sisco Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 11/6/1981
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Biographical Note
Joseph J. Sisco (1919 - 2004) served as the Deputy Director (1958 – 1960) and later, the Director (1960 – 1963) of the United Nations (UN) Office of Political and Security Affairs. This interview focuses on Sisco's assessment of his own experience at the UN, the role and responsibilities of the U.S. ambassador to the UN, and Adlai Stevenson's relationship with President John F. Kennedy (JFK), among other issues.

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Joseph J. Sisco—JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

JOSEPH SISCO

November 6, 1981
Washington, D.C.

by Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: I wonder if we could begin, perhaps.... Well, I know that you were in the UN going back to the Truman [Harry S. Truman] period. You first came on in 1951 and served throughout the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration in UN Political Security Affairs. And my first point I wonder about is, since you were there during 1960, whether you have any observations on change from Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge], Eisenhower, to Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] and Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]. How did the UN change? How did your job change?

SISCO: Well, first of all, the element of commonality is the most important thing. The UN job was viewed as a very high-level job in the administration, Cabinet level or quasi-Cabinet level. You understand the ambiguity as it relates to that particular job. Lodge, after all, was a key factor in the Eisenhower campaign for presidency and making him president and convincing him to run for the presidency. Stevenson, a presidential candidate of his own stripe. And therefore, in one sense, those two high-level appointments represented the major element of continuity and, also, was a reflection of the importance which the United States attached, still at that particular juncture, to the UN itself.

It wasn't until the package deal of the addition of 20 new members, when the UN graduated from a membership of 60 to 80-something, and that then reflected the equilibrium in political strengths between East and West, and the crisis over the Troika, and Hammarskjold [Dag Hjalmar Agne Carl Hammarskjold] was a reflection of that impasse. And give it to Dag was a reflection of the fact that neither major power could steam roll the

Assembly as was the case when our votes were 50 to 5 at the outset of the organization. So I think the important thing is that, just as the Lodge appointment was a reflection of his importance politically, so was it in relationship to Adlai Stevenson.

Now I'll probably jump into a lot of other questions. There's no question but what Adlai Stevenson considered that particular appointment as an alternative to what his desire was, namely to become secretary of state. And obviously, when you're talking to individuals that are appointed in that job, and a good example of it was when Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] appointed Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg], every president has had one basic failing as it relates to the definition of the job description; namely, they tended to equate it much too closely to the position of the secretary of state. And we know that there can only be one secretary of state. But this overdrawing of the importance of the job was an instrument that has been used successfully by presidents to attract the kind of distinguished American that has been appointed in the earlier period. Obviously the situation has changed today. So continuity, I would say, primarily.

The real test, insofar as the Kennedy Administration came, was its experience, really, with the Congo, and there it was a very difficult political operation. But we succeeded in getting the UN presence in the Congo. I would suspect that President Kennedy learned something about the practical application of the UN on the ground. And, after all, if you look at the history of the organization over the last three or four decades, you have to really say that its most successful feature is its peacekeeping operations on the ground. Whereas, obviously, in our public opinion today the focus and the reflection of the reduced support for the UN in the United States carries with it the focus of the minority votes in the General Assembly. And you know that's not where the meat-and-potato issues are decided. They're decided in the Security Council, where we still have a veto.

But the most practical aspect, and the most successful aspect from my vantage point, was the peacekeeping operation. And I think probably President Kennedy learned to appreciate that. He obviously also was most intimately involved, hour-by-hour, with the whole UN thing at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. And there are dozens of stories that all of us can tell in this regard. We'll get to that.

STERN: We'll get to that, right.

SISCO: Okay.

STERN: Let me get back to the very beginning of Stevenson's term at the UN. He clearly, as you already indicated, accepted it as second best. We all know that. And he gave President Kennedy a list of positions, some of which strike me, as I look back on those, as being somewhat unrealistic.

SISCO: Refresh my memory.

STERN: He believe he made basically five points: One that the president would recognize the UN as the center for our foreign policy. That he would have a voice in policy-making, Stevenson, that is. No important decisions without the chance to give his views. That he would attend National Security Council meetings as appropriate. That he

would have the commitment of the Administration to pursue disarmament. And finally that he would have a free hand in the choice of his staff. It seems to me, in real practical terms, the latter was the only thing that he really got. But that's really my question: How realistic were those positions?

SISCO: Well, they were realistic in the sense that he was able to extract, in effect, these kinds of assurances from the president, as other United States ambassadors were able to extract such assurances of a similar character with other presidents. A part of those commitments were full tilt. He did have an opportunity to participate in National Security Council meetings. He did have an opportunity to inject his views on major policy issues. What he probably didn't understand, when he asked for those commitments, is there's no way in which you could sit there in New York and do your job and be able to involve yourself in every one of the major critical issues. So, therefore, you are limited in what you can do. You're one individual. There's a matter of time. It's a matter of the flow of decisions. Cleveland's [Harlan Cleveland] job, and mine subsequently (we used to talk about "the man on the flying trapeze"), you are in that job as assistant secretary. Your real job description is to try to be very sensitive in making sure that these two individuals, the secretary of state and the United States ambassador to the UN, are pointing in the same direction; and to be very sensitive to the likelihood of policy differences, to alert people. The object being to prepare and help prepare the appropriate options for the president so that you avoided confrontational situations between the secretary of state and the United States ambassador to the UN in the Oval Office, confronting the president with these very difficult choices. So, as a general consideration, these are not necessarily totally unrealistic commitments. And obviously they are subject to varying interpretations.

It's clear to me that Stevenson was a very deeply disappointed man in not having become president. Secondly, he had, in my judgment.... Here let's go off the record because I'm not anxious to.... [Pause] Adlai was deeply disappointed in not having become president; and, therefore, he had difficulty, in his relationships, in viewing Kennedy basically as presidential timber. And, secondly, from a philosophical point of view, he viewed himself--his self-image was one of a liberal Democrat, and he did not consider John Kennedy or the Kennedy Family as a liberal element within the Democratic Party. He viewed it more in terms of the conservative, Catholic orientation.

STERN: Right. I think that's quite clear. Do you feel that there was a similar kind of problem vis-à-vis Secretary Rusk [David Dean Rusk]? In that he felt not only that as Stevenson he should have been secretary of state, but he also did not really think of Rusk as having the right orientation or the right qualifications, as the right man for that job as well.

SISCO: I would agree basically with the first part of what you said; namely, that he did feel that he should have been the secretary of state. But it was less based on any expressed feeling or view that I might have heard as to this dichotomy that I've described, or this difference in the image of himself as against the image of John Kennedy. I think it was a different thing. He felt that in terms of stature...

STERN: And experience.

SISCO: ...and experience, he was far superior to Rusk. Now, Dean Rusk was very, very sensitive to this, and he handled Stevenson, in my judgment, with great sensitivity, great delicacy. And one of the most interesting features of my job when I was deputy assistant secretary under Harlan Cleveland, and subsequently when I succeeded Harlan Cleveland, was working very, very closely with Dean Rusk on this personal side of the equation. I felt that he was particularly good and particularly sensitive to handling Adlai Stevenson. And if you'll forgive a somewhat self-serving remark, I felt that I was equally sensitive, and therefore a highly effective assistant secretary. Because we both knew what the job was in human terms.

STERN: Right. That's a terribly important point, I think.

SISCO: And I was in the fortunate position of having excellent personal relationships both with Dean Rusk and with Adlai Stevenson. And no individual, in my judgment, can be an effective assistant secretary for what was then UN Affairs and is now called International Organization Affairs without having the confidence of both, and playing it in such a way that you were being straightforward with both and not trying to dissemble with one as against the other or to try to play one off against the other. I followed one concrete practice; that is, I told them both basically the same thing. And I found that as a result of that I was able to maintain a good relationship with both. And that, I must say, I thought Rusk was absolutely outstanding in this regard.

STERN: Yes. Other people have made the same point, that they thought he was extremely sensitive and understood Stevenson's personal disappointment.

SISCO: Right.

STERN: I think it's a very important point also because it demonstrates, I think particularly to students who are trying to understand, say, the policy issues, than this personal side of things can be so terribly important. Not just what people think about issues, but the way their own biographies, their own disappointments, perhaps, are involved. And those things certainly do matter.

SISCO: Well, I had one advantage in this respect: that I'd been in the State Department for quite a while and gotten to know Rusk. But I had the advantage also of having come from Illinois, and Adlai Stevenson tended to look upon me as a native of his own state. And while I was just a young college student and really didn't get to know him when he ran for governor or when he was governor, I only got to know him really in any serious way when he became the UN ambassador, nevertheless that was very helpful on the personal level.

STERN: What about the other people that Stevenson appointed? I wonder if you'd be willing to assess the quality of his appointments.

SISCO: Sure. Right.

STERN: People like Cleveland, Yost [Charles W. Yost], Pedersen [Richard Foote Pedersen], Plimpton [Francis Taylor Pearson Plimpton].

SISCO: Well, let's start at the Washington end. Harlan Cleveland is probably one of the most imaginative, innovative thinkers in the foreign policy field that one can find.

He is particularly adept at the use of the word "writing," and had a very fine turn of the phrase. Philosophically, he and Stevenson were basically one. Both Harlan and Adlai were liberal Democrats. Cleveland did an effective job, in my judgment, in his relationships with Adlai Stevenson. Adlai Stevenson was in love with the word as well, and they had this in common. And, therefore, in major speeches, people who could use the pen well, such as Harlan Cleveland, such as Dick Gardner [Richard Newton Gardner], such as Tom Wilson [Thomas Wilson], such as Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.], and, to some lesser degree (and I'm not being unduly modest here) and to a lesser degree myself, that provided a certain affinity in terms of the job, the job description, and getting it done.

And Harlan forever, regularly, did a magnificent job of feeding Adlai bright ideas, new ideas, and so on, as we worked together. It was a highly effective team, I just must say, and it was a highly congenial team. And the UN Bureau was, in my judgment, quite an effective backstop to Adlai Stevenson. So that we followed very consistently the practice. We put Adlai Stevenson's office right next to our particular bureau which was good, a new twist we started. We started all that. And, therefore, every major policy issue as it related to the UN General Assembly....

For example, we started the practice of putting together a policy issue paper on all the major items that were going to come up in the General Assembly. We arranged for full exposition and discussions, both with the secretary of state as well as the president, ahead of time on some of these key issues before the opening of the General Assembly. One of the sensitive areas, let me just tell you, was who would make the General Assembly speech, the U.S. speech, and Rusk was very sensitive about this.

STERN: Technically it's his.

SISCO: It's his.

STERN: That's right.

SISCO: So what we did to get around the problem was that neither, in the beginning, Rusk nor Stevenson gave the speech. We arranged that the president would be giving that particular speech. Now that's the kind thing that we did very regularly.

STERN: That's fascinating.

SISCO: Yes.

STERN: I know there must have been, and some of the sources suggest, that inevitably it must have been very difficult merely in terms of the fact that he was in New York and you were in Washington to give him instructions via the phone.

SISCO: No.

STERN: Not really?

SISCO: Not really, for this reason. First of all, we often went to New York, he often came to Washington. Secondly, we were constantly on the telephone. And, interestingly enough, it was not so difficult to give him instructions. Obviously if there were policy differences. But we prepared the groundwork very, very extensively. And that was Harlan Cleveland's strength. His difficulties really arose in two ways: One, the propensity to talk to the press very considerably. And secondly, some difficulty in his relationships with members of Congress and, in particular, Mr. Rooney [John James Rooney], who tended to look at Harlan Cleveland as kind of an Eastern school establishment type professor. And in the hearings he would not refer to Harlan as "Secretary Cleveland." But he would say, "Professor." And he didn't use the word "Professor" in any constructive and complementariness. [Laughter] I'll never forget that. But Harlan, I think, did an effective job.

Francis Plimpton did a fine job, in my judgment. Francis, obviously, didn't have the breadth of experience of an Adlai Stevenson, but he was quite loyal to Adlai Stevenson. He's a good, solid ... a good lawyer. And learned. He grew in the job. He was not a very dynamic speaker. But slowly learned the business in a constructive sort of way. But obviously had a long way to go.

Dick Gardner, my judgment of him: really quite bright, very bright, very quick. Very good in his political judgments. The only difficulty he ran into was that he was initially a young man in a hurry, and had not had very considerable experience in the bureaucracy, and therefore tended to become impatient. But he was so bright and so quick and so good that you got a lot of other people in the bureaucracy who aren't so quick and aren't so good and, frankly, he in some ways tended to intimidate people. So did Harlan Cleveland, by the way. Simply by this force of intellect.

But again, Dick Gardner made major contributions to innovative approaches. And he has today and had a toughness in fiber in terms of evaluating things. He was no starry-eyed liberal. Adlai Stevenson tended.... I don't mean that Adlai Stevenson was a starry-eyed liberal, but there was more of the humanitarian element in an Adlai Stevenson. Dick Gardner was a hard-headed politician. I'll give you an example. When UNCTAD was put together, he knew that UNCTAD historically could become, as it did, a place where we could be very easily outvoted on the basis of one-to-one voting principle. And yet if you looked at the advanced countries, the ten or 12 advanced countries had 85 percent of the real economic strength in the world.

So he tried and succeeded in getting a so-called consensus procedure developed within UNCTAD which gave the advanced countries on paper a veto. Unfortunately, it never really achieved practical implementation. But the whole direction of trying to find a de facto form of weighted voting in an organization where the West and the United States

had the predominant economic strength, that made a helluva lot of sense. And he not only concocted it and developed it, but he spearheaded. And in the process of doing it, this young man who was in a hurry tended, unfortunately, to step on toes. And therefore in certain parts of the bureaucracy he had difficulties.

But I considered him a very, very outstanding deputy assistant secretary, and made, I think, a very outstanding contribution. In my judgment, the book that he wrote on the world order, which was his book on the UN, still represents one of the very best books that's ever been written on the United Nations, in my judgment. I'm very high on Dick.

STERN: How about Ambassador Yost?

SISCO: Charlie Yost was the epitome of the professional: balanced, quiet, self-serving, a very good No. 2 man, very loyal to Adlai Stevenson, a liberal Democrat, every bit as liberal as Adlai Stevenson. Worked effectively in a very quiet sort of way. But these qualities, which made him so effective as a No. 2, while they served him reasonably well when he took over, you've got to remember that, if you look at the job description of that job, even as the representational level has declined in recent years and the importance of the UN has declined in U.S. eyes primarily because of what has happened to the composition in the organization, he was less dynamic in the visible sense.

His greatest strength was the strength of his integrity ... of his intelligence. A very bright guy, a very likable guy, his ability to see the other man's point of view. His strength was not the strength, really, of the tough-minded operator in given instances in extremely difficult situations. Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying he was soft.

STERN: I understand.

SISCO: But he didn't have that kind of dynamism. He did not have the dynamism of a really highly-effective, visible speaker, and so on. So that the gulf between No. 2 and No. 1 is a very considerable one there. But a very.... You know, these were all able people. Let me tell you, this was quite a bunch.

STERN: So you can basically see that Stevenson did a very good job in selecting.

SISCO: No question about it. No question about it.

STERN: How about Pedersen?

SISCO: Pedersen: highly-effective, pragmatic operator. Knew more about the parliamentary procedures in the UN than any of that whole group. And that's because of the fact that he started out, quite frankly, in that area, as I did, in 1951. But he was very effective. He was a very key man in support of Adlai Stevenson as it relates to how does one get from A to Z on this particular problem? Excellent parliamentarian. And in terms of technical know-how, was really just of very major importance and did a very good job.

STERN: How did you feel that Stevenson's press people handled the job, for example, Clayton [Clayton Fritchey]?

SISCO: Clayton did a good job. And the interesting thing is that Clayton, you know, you didn't have the divorce between the public affairs and the substantive people. We all talked to one another. That was an interesting thing. And you had meetings, and there were a number of people in the room. While I was a principal substantive political backstop, hell, I talked to Clayton every other day. So that there was a close integration between the press side of it and the substantive policy. And you can understand why: (A) the visibility of Adlai Stevenson. Two, the UN is a combination of quiet, substantive negotiations on resolutions, but the public presentation is absolutely primary. Third, you had people on the Washington end such as Harlan Cleveland and Dick Gardner and so on who loved talking to the press. In fact they got themselves into some hot water as a result of it. But these were.... Put it this way, these were very, very sensitive people because they were in the public presentation business in and outside of the actual formal trappings of the UN. And therefore, from the point of view of public relations, my God, what a powerhouse it was. There wasn't a man that worked on those problems who didn't understand and was very sensitive to the fact that every word that was spoken, or every little comma as it related to some resolution that we were negotiating, that we were really operating in a public fish bowl. I've never seen stronger people in terms of sensitivity to public relations than this crowd.

STERN: That's an important judgment, especially given the span of your experience at the UN. Very often when students use the oral histories at the library, they will ask questions like just what does an assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs do, for example? And they really have this very great desire to have a concrete sense. I was thinking of asking you if you could sort of describe, more or less, a typical day, just what your general duties were. If that's possible. I know it's a difficult thing.

SISCO: Yes. It really isn't possible because I was...

STERN: Just to give us a range of the things you did.

SISCO: ...assistant secretary of UN Affairs and then assistant secretary for Near Eastern Affairs before I became undersecretary. Well, a typical day is this: You get to the office and you read, one, the overnight intelligence report on the principal developments that have occurred worldwide.

STERN: Cable traffic.

SISCO: Okay? Secondly, your staff has selected out the major cables which are of your concern in your area of responsibility. Second, after you've done that, there is a normal three-day-a-week meeting that the assistant secretary goes to (it varies with secretaries of state, but as an average) that you go to in the secretary of state's office. At this office, if you're an experienced assistant secretary, you do two things: One, you report to the secretary on what you think he ought to know quickly and

briefly in terms of the major developments overnight.

Secondly, if there is a general direction in which you want to move, it's altogether possible to indicate that here is the general direction that you're intending to move. Or that you inform the secretary, you will be getting my recommendation this afternoon. Or this is a matter that you, Mr. Secretary, should consult the president on and that we will prepare something for you on this basis. Or this is something which you should underscore in your own briefing to the president this morning. Depending on what the variation is. So that in the first three hours of the day, you are basically organizing your day.

Then, if you've had a meeting with the secretary, you then call your office directors, and you have a very brief meeting with your office directors. One, to inform them of anything that came out of the secretary's office, particularly in other areas that would impinge on their responsibilities. But more importantly, by that time they will have read their so-called action copy, namely, the responsibility for response to a number of cables. And there the assistant secretary then will make recommendations to the directors, or the directors will seek guidance as to how do you think we ought to proceed?

So that if you're operating a bureau effectively, in the first three hours you will have (A) come to a judgment as to what the principal developments were; two, you will have made sure that the secretary is aware of what the principal developments are because at eleven o'clock in the morning our press spokesman has to go out on some of these issues; and third, you will have gotten together your key people who, at the desk level, are preparing telegrams and responses.

Now there was a particular, however, responsibility that the assistant secretary for UN Affairs would have that was somewhat different than the regional bureaus, than, for example, when I was assistant secretary for Near Eastern Affairs. If there were any developments that morning that were either apt to come up in the UN context merely by the fact that Clayton Fritchey had almost a daily briefing and the reporters didn't limit themselves necessarily to what item was on the agenda; or, alternatively, some important development that was going to require a high-level, definitive, substantive decision either that day or maybe next week; that is where Harlan Cleveland or I or Dick Gardner would pick up the phone with Adlai Stevenson, or in his absence Francis Plimpton, and say, "Look, here's what we're going to be focusing on." And that is one of the many devices that we had in making sure that he didn't get caught off base. Because he undoubtedly at one o'clock that afternoon might be meeting with the following ambassador, and there may have been a worldwide development. Now it's not that they didn't get cables in New York. I'm sure they got cables in New York.

STERN: Not necessarily.

SISCO: Now one of the problems always, and they wanted to be very, very sure that they got all of the traffic. [ANOTHER CONVERSATION BEGINS HERE AT THE SAME TIME AS THE ONE BETWEEN SISCO AND STERN, AND CONTINUES TO THE END OF THIS SIDE. SOMEWHAT DIFFICULT TO PICK OUT EXACTLY WHAT SISCO IS SAYING, AND ESPECIALLY WHAT STERN IS SAYING.] And it was a conference call because they never could get, you could not send all of the traffic that the State Department got. That was [Inaudible] all the way along. But, as assistant secretary, I had a staff assistant who automatically watched this. Although I found that many

times the assistant secretary had to make the substantive judgment itself. If a cable came in from the field that was of major importance, a number of ambassadors were sensitive enough to know that they put as a recipient of that cable USJUN. A number didn't. And therefore we had to be very sure that these got transmitted very quickly and that he had the appropriate cable traffic.

Very important, because even though that's a bureaucratic thing, there were occasions historically (I can't pull one out of my head) where the United States ambassador would argue that he was being denied the traffic, and therefore the State Department was keeping him uninformed. I don't want to name individuals who were in this category because they are still important public figures today.

STERN: Some of the people who worked for Stevenson had [Inaudible]. That it was a kind of chaotic situation. [Inaudible]. And that he was so busy, had so much to do [Inaudible] and substantive that [Inaudible].

SISCO: Well, that is too simplistic, too shallow an interpretation. One, organization was not his field of [Inaudible]. Secondly, this was not a highly centralized administrative apparatus that he ran. People came to him in terms of what ought to be brought to his attention and drawn to his attention, rather than an individual at the top who tended to send pulsations downward. And that was, frankly, a very key function of Harlan Cleveland and a number of us. We provided that kind of a substantive thrust. The mission basically couldn't do that. They were basically implementers. They were basically people who carried out [Inaudible]. They were not in a position to see the broader policy aspects. Dick Pedersen tried to do this to a certain degree because of his professionalism. But he, too, was.... He'd be the first one to admit it was limited to what you can do from that New York vantage. And after all, you don't have to carry it out. You have to see ambassadors and all the rest of it.

But the demands on Adlai's time were those of a social lion. There were two dozen invitations a day. Moreover, he spent a disproportionate amount of his time on words, on speeches. Every major speech that he ever gave that a number of us were involved in, we were making changes up to the time we walked into the meeting room. That was a typical Adlai Stevenson pattern. He just took tremendous amounts of time in the drafting of given speeches. And his bent was there and in the public presentation, rather than in the strength of negotiating the specifics of a resolution.

Arthur Goldberg, in my opinion, was one of the most effective United States ambassadors that we've had historically, by virtue of the one overriding strength of being a highly-effective negotiator behind the scenes. For sure, he was not the speaker of an Adlai Stevenson. The fact is he's a poor speaker, and one of the reasons he lost the gubernatorial race in New York was that he tends to have a pompous style, although he's not that kind of an individual. But he, in my judgment, was one of the most effective negotiating United States ambassadors we have ever had. He has never gotten the amount of credit that he has deserved.

I consider Arthur Goldberg the real architect of Security Council Resolution 242. Lord Carey has claimed the credit. George Brown of Great Britain has claimed credit. A lot of people have claimed credit. But if there is one architect of that resolution, it is Arthur

Goldberg. And if there is one individual who put it all together and negotiated it successfully, given all he deserves, the press and [Inaudible], you will find that in annals of the history of the Arab situation [Inaudible] because he is Jewish, there was the tendency, on the part of the Arab World, to see Arthur Goldberg as the [Inaudible].

But that was not the case. There would not have been the kind of constructive formula, albeit ambiguous formula, in 242 had it not been for Arthur Goldberg. He, to the credit of Lyndon Johnson and to the credit of Dean Rusk at that particular juncture, they delegated almost the total authority to Arthur Goldberg to negotiate that particular resolution. Because Johnson, and I can remember it very clearly, said to him, "You know better than anybody in this government what is a tolerable resolution, in terms not only internationally but in terms of our own domestic equation, as well as what is tolerable insofar as the Israelis are concerned. And to the credit of both Johnson and Rusk, Goldberg was given a huge area of latitude in doing this and deciding what was the policy and what was acceptable and what was not acceptable.

Very unusual, by the way, because even under Stevenson, even under Lodge and all of these people, one misconception is that this was a free-wheeling, free-reining mission. We, in the U.S. government historically have held a tighter rein on our ambassador to the UN than any other delegation that I know. And, by the way, it does not follow that these big figures were necessarily uncooperative. They were very glad to have the kind of effective backstopping that they got.

Sure there were policy differences between Adlai Stevenson and John Kennedy. Sure Arthur Goldberg was the real dove on Vietnam. He was the real dove of the [Inaudible] Administration. George Ball's reputation as the dove of the administration on Vietnam is one that, in my judgment, is overrated. The real dove was Arthur Goldberg. And the people who will historically get their hands on the recommendations of that man [Inaudible] will see that he was in the forefront by far. And as a result, by the way, totally isolated.

STERN: Now, I was going to ask you about the [Inaudible]. Stevenson never got that kind of policy freedom, as far as I can see on the issues. One area, the Congo, he had some policy-making role, and Kennedy immediately honed in on that, I believe. There's a wonderful little anecdote in which he is said to [Inaudible] he wanted to see the UN cables every night because he didn't want to be one-upped in the morning by Adlai Stevenson [Inaudible]. [Inaudible]. He was very sensitive to that.

SISCO: Yes, sure. They were sensitivities on both sides. But there were occasions where we misled Stevenson very well inadvertently. And let me give you some very good examples. Let's take, for example, the whole well-publicized [Inaudible] of the bombing attacks on Cuba, where Adlai Stevenson went into the Security Council and disclaimed American involvement. Well, that was based on misinformation that we provided to Adlai Stevenson inadvertently. And it gave rise as to whether he should resign, you know, the Bay of Pigs. And I know, because I was the conduit for it. It's quite a story.

STERN: I know, for example, when you--you talked to the Latin American Bureau, and you were told not to change his speech.

SISCO: Well, what I did was I contacted the Latin American Bureau and read this and so

on. And I was quite frankly assured that that was accurate. And, therefore, I went over it with Adlai and said to Adlai over the phone, "I called [Inaudible]." And so therefore we both [Inaudible].

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

STERN: Virtually everyone was [Inaudible].

SISCO: Yes, and Adlai never held it against me because he and I were both in the same boat. But I can tell you after that particular incident, he gave serious thought as to whether he should resign.

STERN: Did he feel that his integrity had been compromised at the UN?

SISCO: Yes, he did.

STERN: His credibility was important.

SISCO: Yes. Right. Sure.

STERN: Just let me get.... It's just an interesting little aside. I don't think it's a terribly important point. But I've gotten very conflicting responses on this from people at the UN. But I was told by one person that at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis a year and a half later, that when Stevenson was given the photographs of the missile sites, he initially refused to use them. And was very concerned, because of the Bay of Pigs experience, that they might be doctored or false photographs and had to almost be forced to use them. While another person said that's absolutely untrue. Do you have any recollection of that time?

SISCO: Oh, sure, I've got a very good recollection of this. I was probably more intimately involved than anybody you've talked to in this regard. Let me try to put something together for you that might be helpful. First of all, obviously he was sensitive, as you can well appreciate and understand. Secondly, you've got to remember that there were two tracks that were being pursued. [Pause]

STERN: You were telling me about the results in terms of Stevenson's credibility.

SISCO: Unfortunately, I'm going to have to cut off at eleven-thirty, and I apologize. Jesus! I'm sorry about this. But to tell you what's happened, I've got to go out of town, and I've had to move a couple of things up. But let's go ahead.

STERN: Okay. You were talking about Stevenson's response in '62 after the photographs.

SISCO: Oh, yes, the photographs. It had been communicated to him that here is what the photographs show. And there was skepticism, there's no question. So therefore we decided that we really had to show him the photographs. I was put on a plane with the photographs and with some military people. And I can't tell you the night, but I flew there at night, and we made the initial--they made the initial presentation.

Now, the critical question was this: Several of us, and principally Arthur Schlesinger, Tom Wilson, and I've forgotten who else, had put together about a 65-page speech for Adlai for presentation of the whole case in the Security Council. After he saw the pictures and so on, he was ready both to present the pictures, as well as to make this major exposition. We stayed up most of the night, all of the night, finished the speech, and so on. And the next morning we got up.

Now, the second track that was going on was that we had contacted the secretary general, and we had said to the secretary general, "We want you to contact the Soviet Union. If they go ahead with these ships with the missiles, we are going to intercept them, and there's going to be a confrontation. And we want them to turn away." So you have this eyeball-to-eyeball situation.

Now, the decision that we had to take that morning was do we make the full exposition, the 65-page speech, plus all of the pictures on the easels (I've still got, if I look, I've got the picture and all of that because Dick Pedersen and I were behind Stevenson throughout that the whole thing), and do we really let them have it at ten-thirty that morning? We got a call from--I got a call because the way we divided it up was that I would be the liaison in New York while Harlan would be the liaison in Washington. About eight or nine o'clock, Harlan said, "Look, Joe, the president does not want the whole speech given and the photographs and everything else, pending the arrival of a response from the Soviets through the quiet diplomatic channels. We don't want to give the Soviets the pretext and the handle not to respond positively." Because, you know, that was the real world in terms of....

So I told Adlai, "Adlai, the president does not want you to make this speech in totality. Here is the reason." Adlai got very angry. He said, "No, the speech is ready, and we're going to go ahead, and I'm going to give it." And I said to Adlai, I said, "Well, look, Adlai, I don't see how you can override the president on this." So I immediately called Cleveland, and I said, "Look, Harlan, tell the president that Adlai does not agree. He's going to go ahead and make this speech." And we had already brought the easel and the photographs in the side room. There's a little side room outside the, not the.... It was all, you know.... The military were around, ready, whenever they were to do it.

Well, we got to the Security Council, and I got further word that the.... Oh, and I said to Harlan, "There is no way I can convince him, Harlan. The only way we can convince him is if the president calls him himself." And I said, "Look, as soon as I get to the Council Chamber, then see what you can do." We walked into the Council Chamber, and, you know, I immediately got a little message. The telephone booths are right outside the Security Council Chamber. "Joe, tell Adlai that the president wants to talk to him. And Adlai should come to the phone."

So Adlai has the 65-page speech there. He's going through it as is his wont. And I said, "Adlai, the president wants to talk to you." He turned to me. He said, "Goddamn it, Joe!

The meeting is just beginning. It's ten-thirty. Tell him I can't do that. I'm giving the speech. I can't talk to him." I said, "Adlai--" and I used the word "Adlai," "--you cannot refuse to talk to the president." I said, "Now, you've got to talk to him. You know how he feels. In the meantime, I will get a delay in the Security Council meeting." He grumbled, and he went off. I then walked to the president of the Security Council who was the Russian, Zorin [Valerian A. Zorin].

STERN: Zorin, right.

SISCO: I said, "Mr. Ambassador, you know that our government is in contact with yours. Governor Stevenson is just getting a message from the president, and therefore is not ready." He said, "Mr. Sisco, I won't start the meeting until you give me the signal that you're ready." This was his response. I then went back to our seat where I had a copy of the 65-page speech, in which I slashed about 40 pages out of the speech while Adlai Stevenson was on the phone. He came back and grumbled and said, "You know, well, they don't want us to..." And so on. I said, "Adlai, I have taken out what I consider the relevant parts, and here's what I think you can do until we hear the Soviet reply through the secretary general."

So that he read the first part of that speech. He didn't know what I'd cut out and what I hadn't cut out. And that first part of the Security Council meeting proceeded. He opened it with the speech. Just about at the end of that truncated portion, I got word--we got word--that the Russians had responded to the secretary general, and that the president had been given assurances through the secretary general that the ships had turned around. Dick Pedersen and I then told Stevenson, "Call for a suspension of the meeting." Which he did. We then went into the side room, and we told Stevenson (just the two of us; there were only three of us: Pedersen, myself, and Stevenson), "Now you must create a crisis atmosphere in the Security Council. Now you give the entire 65-page speech. Now we bring out the easel and the photographs." Which we did. The words that he spoke in terms of, "yes or no, Mr. Zorin, 'til hell freezes over," all his. It was not in the text. It was totally ad-libbed. That was Adlai Stevenson, pure and simple. Nobody deserves any credit for that except Adlai Stevenson. And then the story unfolded. That's the story. I've got this written, by the way.

STERN: That's fascinating.

SISCO: I haven't done anything with it, but it's written.

STERN: Absolutely fascinating.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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