

Winifred Armstrong Oral History Interview – 7/8/2008
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Armstrong, African affairs consultant and speechwriter for John F. Kennedy (1959-1961), discusses efforts to counteract racial discrimination in renting practices in order to find housing for African diplomats in Washington, D.C., her work as an African affairs advisor and speechwriter for John F. Kennedy (JFK), and JFK's meetings with Thomas J. Mboya and Sékou Touré, among other issues. In this interview Armstrong refers to the files she donated to the Library, the Personal Papers of Winifred Armstrong (#356)

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Winifred Armstrong
Interviewee

October 27, 2015
Dated

[Signature]
Director Assistant Archivist for
Presidential Libraries

December 18, 2015
Dated

Winifred Armstrong

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Oral History Interview

with

Winifred Armstrong

Boston, Massachusetts

July 8, 2008

by Stephen Plotkin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

ARMSTRONG: This is Winifred Armstrong speaking on July 8, 2008, to the tape of Stephen Plotkin at the Kennedy Archives, about the story of trying to find housing for—apartments, housing—for African diplomats coming for the first time to the United States in 1960. This initiative was developed by Winifred Armstrong, and here's the story; the file with considerably more material is being delivered today to the Kennedy Library. I will at some point give a cast of characters here, almost like a play, because it would be useful for reference.

This started in probably July, early August, 1960, when an African friend of mine, asked if I could help him find an apartment since he had been unsuccessfully seeking one for several months. I said yes, and asked the State Department African Bureau if they could back up any efforts we made. They said no. But one or two individuals agreed to talk with owners or brokers privately if it would help. Shortly after this, the story of the rejection by the resident manager of an apartment of four African guests, who were sent here by the State Department, from a Washington, D.C., apartment house, broke in the *Washington Post*. That was the week of August 8th, and that article is in the file. I talked with the reporter, Milton Viorst, and mentioned the problem of African diplomats in finding housing. He picked this up, phoned me the next day. I checked with various of my African friends in the embassies to see if they would be willing to talk with him and briefed him on some of the background.

With the agreement, permission, blessing of Senator Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] office, I proceeded to more or less develop what I guess turned into a campaign over the next

several weeks. As Milton Viorst developed the story for the *Post*—and I'll come to that in a little while—but essentially Milt developed the story, getting interviews and so forth from the various African diplomats. And, well, I'll tell the story now. He was ready to—he was under pressure from his editor to publish before I was ready with all the bits and pieces to have the article published so we could follow up immediately with the campaign. We contacted—I guess I would say I contacted—some of the following: David Sawyer of the District Council for Human Relations; that was part of, a one-man office actually, of the D.C. Commissioners (a unit of the D.C. government.) And he—and I'm jumping the gun here—but he ultimately asked the—he jumped right in and ultimately worked with the D.C. Commissioners in asking the State Department to join the D.C. Commissioners in an effort to end discrimination in housing against the African diplomats. Requested the District Commission, requested Secretary of State Herter [Christian A. Herter] to have a meeting with the local real estate board. Again, that will tie into other things I'm mentioning. We got, we dealt with the Senate D.C. Committee, which included Senators Vance Hartke and Senator Prouty [Winston Lewis Prouty]. Hartke wrote a letter to Herter, which is in the file. He was a Democrat from Indiana. We avoided the House District Committee because they—I don't remember who was on it, but whoever they were, we did not expect them to be sympathetic to this initiative.

Fred Clarke [Frederick J. Clarke], the acting president of the Board of the District Commissioners, followed up and was helpful. We asked—I asked—Frances Bolton [Frances Payne Bolton], Republican of Ohio, and one of two active members of the House Subcommittee on Africa; the other was Barratt O'Hara (Democratic congressman from Illinois.) Frances Bolton was a Republican congresswoman from the Cleveland area, had been to Africa in '57, I believe. I've included her report on that trip in another part of the things I gave to the Kennedy Library. And asked her to contact Fred Morrow [E. Frederic Morrow] in the White House staff; that was under Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], who was then president. She, I believe, contacted Senator Prouty, the Republican on the D.C. Committee. Fred Morrow, by the way, on the White House staff is the brother of John Morrow [John Howard Morrow], who was the U.S. ambassador to Guinea in West Africa.

Bolton was very helpful. And I overheard, when I called her office one day and they told her who was on the line, and she said, Oh, yes, she would speak to me. I was very whatever, knowledgeable, helpful, something. Anyway, it was important to have her, a Republican person, working on our behalf in this because Wiley Buchanan [Wiley T. Buchanan], the head of the State Department Division of Protocol, where this might automatically go in the State Department, he had said, "It's only the anti-American Africans who are complaining." And that could have put the kybosh on further efforts if we had not run around left end. Or at least that's my opinion.

I wrote the African-American Institute, a private organization dealing with Africa. There's a memo in the file to Harry—I forget his last name. But they ultimately in November appointed a special person to deal with this and to deal with both the housing and diplomats but also working with the wives since many people came to America for the first time not knowing all the ins and outs of American plumbing and technology and so forth. There are also, there's also a background memo, a couple of important memos, to and from George Nesbitt who was with the Housing and Home Finance Agency; not directly involved, but he was very—he was instrumental and helpful. You can see the memorandum.

Milt Viorst of the *Washington Post* was ready to go, as indicated, with his article, and we were not ready with all of the immediate follow-up letters we needed for that article from Senator Hartke, from others. Senator Kennedy had written August 25th to Secretary Herter about this issue proposing that the State Department call a meeting with the real estate board and brokers. That letter is in the file. And that, in a sense, gave the imprimatur to me and our office to follow up.

The Washington Real Estate Board had over a hundred members—sorry—a thousand member firms, and they pledged privately to do.... We picked and chose among the brokers in terms of importance and attitude for who would come to a State Department meeting and ultimately got that meeting November 1st, although the State Department did very little to follow up. And there's again reference to that, trying to push them along, in the files. The Bureau of Social Science Planning picked up to get a survey they had been wanting to do on housing for foreign diplomats and foreign students. And I'm not sure whether that ever got done or not. The National Capital Clearinghouse for Neighborhood Democracy, Oliver Popenoe, president, got good information out to the wider community. That's also in the files. And had some quite practical suggestions for other follow-up.

On November 1st I think three of the district commissioners, including the chair, McLaughlin [Robert E. McLaughlin], David Sawyer, the staff, and fourteen of the major real estate brokers and owners met with the State Department one and a half hours, with State Department representatives Fink, William Penfield, and Vaughan Ferguson—that's in the file in any case—to determine what could be done and how. And the State Department financed a visit by Commissioner McLaughlin to visit several African countries to welcome them [Laughs] on his way to the Middle East.

The State Department higher-ups had not in the past dealt with housing, did not want to have to deal with it. The junior officers, desk officers, and so forth whose immediate clientele were affected, did want to be in a position to do something and were personally helpful in calling and so forth. I don't know that it really, you know, it never got totally resolved in a Republican administration as to what the policy would be. But we certainly stirred the pot.

In December '60 I wrote a short, two or three pages, report on housing for African diplomats for the Africa Taskforce, Kennedy's Africa Taskforce, which was part of the planning group during and after the presidential campaign, in which I was doing a variety of other things under Robert Good [Robert C. Good], who headed the overall African taskforce. And that proposal was that—it's also in the file—that some person or persons in the State Department be appointed as part of their job to assist African and possibly other diplomats in Washington to secure, you know it could be a liaison with the real estate board. It didn't have to put them in direct line of fire, would not entail locating housing for diplomats; but might include contacting embassies to ascertain prospective as well as present housing needs, introduction of embassy representatives to real estate board, et cetera. In any case, you know, one never entirely knows what the direct lines were. But I did talk with Angier Biddle Duke, who became the new director of Protocol (in the Kennedy Administration) about all this and sent a memo February 8, 1961, to Pedro Sanjuan [Pedro A. Sanjuan], who went into the Protocol Division, on possible program ideas for the Protocol Division on the question of how to deal with the questions of housing. That was a big night. I'm just looking. Five pages. Well, anyway, good memo.

And April 27, '61, then it's the new State Department under Kennedy. Launched an interstate campaign to erase the dangers of racial incidents involving foreign diplomats. That press release is in the file. And July 6, '61, several of the District's most prominent apartment building owners pledged their support to the State Department in its efforts to erase housing discrimination against foreign diplomats. Tra la. Oh, here we have a D.C. Housing Committee, which includes the Chief of Protocol, Angier Biddle Duke, Pedro Sanjuan, Assistant Chief of Protocol. Good for you! Okay. So in the file is also material on some efforts made in New York in 1959, which I had been part of, to find things for UN African diplomats, which Lodge had supported—Henry Cabot Lodge. When this is typed up, I would recommend that Mr. Plotkin and I... Well, one, I would recommend that it be as a kind of a frontispiece or end piece, whatever, for the file, so that it pulls the pieces together. Going to be a long-term argument. And that we consider whether it is a useful story to tell in any other venue—V-E-N-U-E. Thank you. I'd be happy to read this when it's transcribed. This is the end of that. Thank you. [Break]

PLOTKIN: Stephen Plotkin talking with Ms. Winifred Armstrong on July 8, 2008. I'm just asking a few questions about some matters with which she worked during her time with the Senator. And I'm hoping to get a few answers. To begin with, you were mentioning a little bit earlier that you had some, did some work with the airlift, the African airlift of students. And I'm hoping that you can expand on that a little bit now, a little about what you did, what you saw when that was going on.

ARMSTRONG: I'm going to start with a disclaimer. [Laughs] Not a good introduction but nonetheless. I knew, you know, I had been involved in African stuff for a number of years and come back, you know, from a long couple of years in Africa. So things to do with Africa in Washington and New York, I tended to be at least on the periphery of, if not in the middle of. That effort was, however, organized by a group, the East African Airlift Group, which was in New York primarily, Frank Montero [Frank C. Montero] and Bill.... I'll think of it in a minute [Bill Scheinman]. And it was, I would say the Kennedy office didn't really get involved until it ran into real trouble. I'm probably telling you more than you want to know. But they didn't have any experience with moving students around, with briefings and orientations, with placement, with the whole panoply of student placement. This was a, when I say political light, I don't mean that in any negative way. But this was an effort to help something where the State Department had not been involved. And I just remind the listener [Laughs] that we didn't have a State Department office on Africa until about 1959, '58 or '59. We had always worked with the Colonials (U.K., France, Belgium, Portugal.) So this was in that shifting area. And there was urgency to educate, and people were very eager to be educated. Anyway, I'm probably telling you more than you want to know. But I do that.

But when places had been arranged for—when students had been selected and encouraged, and African families had sold goats and, you know, raised money, and there was an airlift, and then we hadn't worked out—they hadn't worked out—the real details of this, so that visas and other arrangements could be.... Tom Mboya—Tom Mboya of Kenya [Thomas J. Mboya]—went to see the Kennedys at Hyannisport. And they agreed to have the Foundation put up the money to get people from here to there. You know. And at that point, I

believe—and this is history that would need to be checked—but I believe actually from my files and memory that then there was a big kafuffle, and I'm not sure anybody's terribly clear. But the State Department then got back into the fray. Because at that point, people didn't necessarily want the Kennedys taking credit for, I don't know. I mean these things can happen in many ways. And on this one I wasn't that close to it. And as I say, I'm not sure anybody really knows what the whole, but I certainly don't. Anyway, I mean I can tell you about parallel events. But exactly what the connecting tissue was, I'm not sure.

In any case, since the Kennedy Foundation had come to the rescue, you know, we were then more involved. And you will find in the file there, I mean memos that I did write about orientation and selection, placement. I mean the usual. And I'm no expert on that either, but more than some of the people who were involved. And I've no idea whether it made any difference. Because, as I say, I was not intimately involved in it. But then we got, you know many of the students I helped with the orientation after they got here and knew many of the people. I'm not sure that's what you wanted to know in the first place.

PLOTKIN: No, that sounds, I think, very [unclear].

ARMSTRONG: And there were other people. There were other people in the Kennedy orbit who had some hand in that in ways that were not connected to my ways. Which isn't to say there was any problem.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: It was just.... If you remember, this was in 1960 in the more or less height of the campaign. And the people administering it were not neat or experienced in their administration of it. So that things got lost in the process wasn't really the fault [Laughs] of certainly not the Kennedy office, you know. Harris Wofford [Harris L. Wofford, Jr.] was probably somewhat involved. I know how he....

PLOTKIN: Harris Wofford?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

PLOTKIN: Who else would have maybe been working for this in other ways?

ARMSTRONG: I don't know. I don't know. I really didn't have much contact with the Kennedy Foundation [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation].

PLOTKIN: Right, right.

ARMSTRONG: So I don't know. I don't know.

PLOTKIN: What was your sense for how, why, and where you made the connection with JFK, with Kennedy?

ARMSTRONG: Say that again?

PLOTKIN: What was your sense, from where you were standing, of how Mboya made the connection with Kennedy? How did you see that developing? Can you cast your mind back that way?

ARMSTRONG: You mean how did Tom Mboya get to go to Hyannisport?

PLOTKIN: Yes, all that kind of thing.

ARMSTRONG: Well, specifically, I don't know, except the context. When I first went to see Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] in '59 at the suggestion of Ernie Lefever, who was then working for Senator Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], and whom I had known when he was working for the National Council of Churches, in my first job in New York at the Council of Christians and Jews, I didn't tell you, but you know how these things happen. Anyway, from the time I first had contact with the Kennedy office, first on the speech to AMSAC, the American Society of African Culture, which was Kennedy's first policy speech on Africa after he'd taken over the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa, I having just come back from two years in Africa and having met all manner of people, white and black, colonial and independence leaders, wanted people here—not just Kennedy—I wanted people here to start meeting some of these people. And they were eager to tell their stories.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: So when I first became attached to the Kennedy office in Washington, I did very deliberately try to set up meetings with Kennedy and many other Congress people and other significant people in Washington, with African representatives who—white, black—were beginning to come to the U.S. They were briefings, in essence. So in that pattern of, you know, arranging for Kennedy and others to meet visiting Africans, I had arranged for Tom Mboya to meet Kennedy (some of this correspondence is in the file;) he knew me. That isn't to say I arranged that Hyannisport meeting. I didn't. I think the people, Frank Montero and the other guy [unclear], but the two people who were the impetus for the East African Airlift, arranged that meeting. But it wasn't.... By that time, that was a year after we started meeting all sorts of Africans, and Tom Mboya was no retiring wallflower anyway, so by that time everybody was used to either me or somebody else calling up and saying, X is here and would like to see you. You know. Now the East African Airlift was a sensitive matter, and not everybody went to Hyannisport to discuss the matter. And I'm not privy to that discussion.

PLOTKIN: Yes, yes. But it was part of a general pattern of increasing contacts.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, yes.

PLOTKIN: Do you have a sense for any...?

ARMSTRONG: Increasing contact. And let me say, again, since it was a campaign time—I...

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: ...I think I've told you in other contexts, we spent considerable time in the end of 1959 considering a possible launch in the fall of '59, considering a possible trip for Kennedy to Africa, and virtually planning, you know, for possible scenarios. [Unclear] they decided that he'd better put his time into traveling and working in this country. But he was always open to the possibility of meeting X or Y, and we could arrange for him to meet X or Y hither and thither. Didn't have to be in the office in Washington. And I've told you the story of arranging him to meet Sékou Touré, the president of Guinea, in the Walt Disney Studio. And they were crossing—one was one was coming from the Los Angeles Airport and one was going to the Los Angeles Airport, and I was trying to find where in the whole United States their itineraries might cross. So for Tom Mboya to go to Hyannisport, I mean people went where he was. And he was willing to have that happen.

PLOTKIN: Actually could you fill out just a little bit about Touré because although I know this, I don't think that it's on tape yet. I know the story in sum, but I don't think we've got all down.

ARMSTRONG: It's a great story.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: Well, it's a funny story, it's a nice story. And it's in the file. But Touré, Sékou Touré, was the first president of Guinea. He was the one Francophone African country that had said no to the French proposition of a—I'm not remembering what the proper word is for their close arrangement, but he had said no. He didn't want to be part of the French whatever. And the French had done everything then. I mean they literally took toilet seats, you know, I mean they took everything out of Guinea, leaving him not much. In any case, he was a very independent guy. And he came on his first trip to the United States, and, you know, everybody wanted to meet Kennedy. And Kennedy basically wanted to meet I won't say everybody, but he was curious and interested and, you know, enjoyed meeting and talking substantively with people. I mean these were not just courtesy visits. And Kennedy deserves, you know, 98 percent of the credit for that, but I'll take 2 percent, you know, and so will other staff. I mean we gave him substantive background on stuff to help the process, make it better for everybody.

In any case, Touré was coming. Tom Cassily was the desk officer in the State Department who was arranging his visit. He and I, there was no GIS in those days, and you sweated over the maps to see where they might cross paths. And it appeared that they would be crossing paths in Los Angeles when Kennedy was flying out and Touré was flying in. It may have been the other way around. But in any case, and where therefore might they be

able to literally cross paths. And so you're getting out the maps, and you're looking at the Airport Road, and what's along the Airport Road where they might detour. And Walt Disney Studio is on that road. So Winifred called Walt Disney Studio, you know, the secretary to the president. I've learned that a long time ago when we want to get something done, call the secretary to the president.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: The world's made up of people who say yes unless there's a good reason to say no, or who say no unless there's a good reason to say yes. And fortunately she was on the yes side. Sometimes you can intrigue them with these really odd requests. So yes, they could drive in at—they would each cross there about three-thirty in the afternoon or whatever time it was, and she would arrange a place for them to have a conversation for half an hour, and they would drive out again. Please don't bother them with anybody in the shop. [Laughs] So that was fine. And it worked. And they were both well pleased. And as I had told you, I did not know until subsequently, when that student wrote the paper¹, and divulged a lot more materials later, that there was a later call according to other people's documents, not mine, that when the Russians—I'm going to say '62, but I don't really know; have to check—when the Russians asked Touré—well, you can check this; this is not.... When the Russians were asking for a base in Guinea, my understanding from other people's research is that Kennedy called Touré and said he'd be mighty obliged "if you didn't give it to them." And I don't know the ins and outs of this. But it is inferred that their earlier conversation at the Walt Disney Studio helped the second, at least the access or the attitude of the second conversation. That's not even for quotation from me.

PLOTKIN: Right.

ARMSTRONG: I mean that's only, go look further.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: But certainly they did meet and had a good talk, and Guinea came up in other contexts because there was also [unclear] and stuff going on.

PLOTKIN: Right.

ARMSTRONG: In Guinea at the time.

PLOTKIN: I guess this may be too speculative as a question, but do you feel that Kennedy's interest was greater than some of his fellow politicians in Washington? Do you think he saw Africa as....

¹ Smith, Evan M., class paper from the University of Pennsylvania, 2004 in which he references: Mahoney, Richard. *Ordeal in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 245.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, heaven's yes!

PLOTKIN: Because it sounds that way.

ARMSTRONG: Well, when he took over the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa, Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] was the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Fulbright did not want the subcommittees to have much power, influence, independence, you know. So I'm going to say we, you know, we had to make what that role was. Well, having been appointed, Kennedy was then invited to speak at the American Society of African Culture's second annual conference, and used that occasion to make a fairly major, significant speech on Africa, which is the one that's in the *Strategy of Peace* and other places where people pick up what did he say about Africa? What did he say about X? And that was the speech that I happened to come to meet Ted Sorensen when I was back after two years from Africa on my own to learn what I could about education and economics that we would need to know here and to start that process of the contacts. When, as I said, when I left, we did not have a State Department office on Africa. We certainly didn't have things like Peace Corps and so forth and so on. It was pretty *tabula rasa* in terms....

So when Ted asked me if I would like to draft the first policy speech on Africa, I mean, as I say, I was recently back from two years and full of it. I certainly would! And did. I later learned that whenever Kennedy had a major policy speech to make on some new subject, it was the practice of the office to ask a dozen of the best people, and quite a variety, but a dozen or so of the best people for their thoughts, not necessarily for a draft speech, but for their thoughts on what ought to get said. And people would send one page or twelve pages or whatever they would send. People are glad to do that.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: For the most part. And it was, as I say, it was long after I wrote my draft, most of which—much of which—was in fact used for that speech, that I saw the file with Barbara Ward and Fred Burke and numerous other people that they had written, and I learned more as I worked with the office that this was normal practice. And many good ideas were contained therein. But, you know, I was on the spot in writing the text. So I got more of—who knows? Anyway.... And then it wasn't that you were choosing among totally opposite, I mean there were very different perspectives and approaches. In any case, I was saying—what was the question?

PLOTKIN: Well....

ARMSTRONG: Oh, interest.

PLOTKIN: Yes, interest.

ARMSTRONG: No question, to me. And I mean I was there long enough so polite

interest [unclear]. He and Ted Sorensen read the stuff I gave them and didn't ask for a whole lot. But again, the.... I would describe, and I'm coming back to your question, but I would describe, from where I saw anyway, I would describe that office as one in which the people in professional roles were respected for what they knew. And you were to give the best of what you knew. You were to propose what would be useful; you know, not wait for somebody to tell you. You could go as far as you liked in terms of getting information and so forth. I mean it was up to you to reach out and find the sources and put the ideas together. And certainly free to offer your own best judgment on stuff, preferably among the options. But you could give the options and say what you thought. You did not in that office—this is my perspective—you did not make the decisions. Kennedy made the decisions. And I don't know whether Ted Sorensen and Kennedy, you know.... But you presented with, as I said, all the judgment you might want to muster. But the decisions got made there.

That, as you know—that's not fair; I don't know what you know. That was a problem for Kennedy when he got to the White House. Because that practice of getting the best opinions you can but then making your, but he will make the decision on the best information and all of the information that is then available. And when you are an executive at the top with many, many layers, which is not the Senate office with not many layers and an assumption of competence, then to go to an executive office where there were umpteen layers and many of them layers within layers.... I mean you didn't control all those layers. The State Department had its own layers. And so, as you know, I think, Kennedy was often, in the first year, very frustrated because he didn't know what he was getting. And that's why, in my view, you would read about his calling up the third secretary down the line whom he went to grade school with at seven o'clock in the morning just to get the straight scoop. It wasn't that he thought he was getting the whole scoop. But he was getting the straight scoop.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: You know of something. And by the time it layered up to him as president, you know you don't know what you're getting because everybody's corrected for the boss above him. And I'm sure you saw the movie *Thirteen Days*² about the Cuban Missile Crisis?

PLOTKIN: Actually no.

ARMSTRONG: Well, go see that movie because I think it represents very well that problem. What the hell am I getting here? You don't know. You know you're getting a controlled opinion. Drove him crazy. Anyway, on Africa, we certainly had conversations. I mean both what I sent got read, what I thought was important got, you know, into the mix. When we would sit down and have conversations, I mean they were fun. And they weren't two minutes. When he sat down and had conversations with the Africans, again white or black. I mean it's fun to brief somebody who

² *Thirteen Days*. Dir. Roger Donaldson. Perf. Kevin Costner, Bruce Greenwood, Steven Culp. New Line Cinema, 2000.

is (a) already fairly knowledgeable, and (b) a quick study and interested. So he was fun to—it was fun to work there because you were working with somebody bright, able, and interested. And they saw that.

I won't put this well now. I should work on it and work on how to put it. But the exchanges between people, there was a respect and an interest for what each would be contributing to whatever world they were in. Well, first of all, that brings out the best in people. But it's so different from what others I would say, including George Bush, and I don't mean to—I'm just using that as a whipping boy right now—where our interests and your interests—our interest in you is only if it is useful to our interests. Otherwise we're not interested. And that was not the perspective that dominated his conversation.

PLOTKIN: You talked a little bit about....

ARMSTRONG: So I felt useful.

PLOTKIN: Yes. You very [unclear] talked a little bit about....

ARMSTRONG: I'm going to say one other thing just because I'm thinking of it now. But my status in the office was, I suppose, well, maybe it was peculiar, maybe it wasn't. I came for six weeks; the paper is in there....

PLOTKIN: Right.

ARMSTRONG: ...that says whatever. And I stayed a year and a half. I worked most of the time out of the Library of Congress office that he had assigned. That was my office, which I shared later with Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin]. But, you know, I was over in the Senate office all the time.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: Did I see Kennedy frequently? Well, I saw him frequently. Did we sit down for briefing conversations often? I would say probably not. I remember a couple, I don't know if I said every couple of weeks, but I really don't know. I could go back and look at my schedule, but I may not have even put it down because, you know, you don't put down whom you go and see in the office—not me anyway—every day. But it was.... And I was let to have.... [END OF SIDE A, BEGINNING OF SIDE B OF TAPE]

And I arranged appointments and things. But that working on the diplomatic housing thing was certainly my initiative. Now I certainly cleared any initiatives that I was going to take. And I wasn't taking it necessarily in the name of the Kennedy office. But people knew I was under the umbrella of the Kennedy office, so I wouldn't do anything totally on my own. But I was certainly encouraged, not discouraged. Anyway, everybody was informed. But I wasn't [unclear], as it were, by the office to do that. And there were, as you have already mentioned, I mean there were other Africa things that happened in and around the office that

I didn't have much to do with. I didn't get Tom Mboya to Hyannisport, not directly. Indirectly I did. I had certainly something to do with it.

PLOTKIN: You talked a little bit about sort of the process and speeches [unclear] working within the context of the other staff [unclear] speech. And so I guess I'm going to go back to that since we've already moved into that area; and just, you know, see if you can tell me anything more about the experience of doing those speeches, doing that speech or any others. It doesn't sound like there was a direct hierarchy of draft [unclear] one and next and next. But more like a round-robin kind of thing. How was your—what do you remember about the experience of writing them?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, there's a file in there of speech material, and that will give you some insights, some. And here, in no order of importance, I'm just, I could propose that we make a statement for somebody's independence or we acknowledge some big African conference or we something or other, and draft something, and it would or would not go. Now that was not a speech; that's an acknowledgment. But with Kennedy as head of the Africa subcommittee, if he wanted to make here, if he wanted to make some kind of record of acknowledgment or just, people are so pleased, especially at that point of their independence stuff, and given the presidential, you know, I mean Kennedy was simply one more candidate at that point. He wasn't, you know, but people knew who he was. And at that point in African history any acknowledgement that their occasion is important was important. So I tried to be on the alert for making sure that a telegram³ went to the independence or something. "Greetings to." And it's not that you—I mean you want to do that in a way that isn't self-important, you know.

PLOTKIN: Right.

ARMSTRONG: It's just by the by, but if this is handy, hello, kind of—at least that's my take on it. Because I think otherwise it can be a little ostentatious. But that's me. I don't think I ever had that discussion with Kennedy, but it seemed to wash. So things like that. Then actual speeches where, I don't know, Ted or Fred—Ted Sorensen or Fred Holborn [Frederick L. Holborn], maybe Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] but not very often—would say this has come up, and would I draft something? And there's a lot in African education, African economics, you know, stuff you'd draft and then you can draw on this's and that's. You wouldn't say, not terribly major, but some of significance. You know because things come up in the context of other.... I mean he could be making a speech on foreign policy and answering a question or something, and it's not necessarily a big major speech.

PLOTKIN: Right.

ARMSTRONG: But you want to be ready. So there's that kind of background of your

³ There are copies of such cables we sent in the files. We usually let the State Department know we were doing it.

stuff in the files. I keep pointing to the files that we're sitting with, the pile of papers in front of.... [Laughs] Some I got asked for. Some I proposed. Then I either could propose or get asked by other people [unclear]. Chester Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] was certainly one, where, I mean that was my first experience—I was fairly young—doing this stuff. But it was my first time when I was drafting something for Chester Bowles, when I was quoting something I had written for John Kennedy. So it was me quoting me. But alright, you know, it sure isn't the first or last time. But there were only a couple of people knowledgeable about Africa when I went to The Hill in 1959—Jonathan Moore who worked for Senator Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall] of Massachusetts, also of Massachusetts, had been in Liberia, and he is a friend to this day, you know, and he later worked for the John Kennedy School of Government. And he was in the Department of Defense. And he and I were about the only two staffers who had much exposure to Africa. And as I said, Frances Bolton, the congresswoman from Ohio, had been, and Barratt O'Hara of the House was genuinely interested, not very profound, but genuinely interested. And as I think I have told you in other contexts, Barratt O'Hara tried to get a joint trip with Kennedy when Kennedy was thinking about also going to Africa. Barratt O'Hara wanted to make that a joint trip. And we played with that notion. But it didn't really ever have much traction when he was still considering going because I think he would have wanted to make his own trip.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: And frankly, again, many things weigh into that. But to the extent that I weighed in, I thought it was probably better for him to do his own shtick anyway because he'd be freer, he could have the conversations he wanted to have in the context that he wanted to have them in. He and Barratt O'Hara... Barratt O'Hara was a lovely man, but they are different. And when you have limited time and circumstances, you want to make the most of it.

PLOTKIN: Correct.

ARMSTRONG: And as I said, my experience was that Kennedy had very good conversations with people. They didn't waste time on amenities and stuff. And that's as easy on a trip overseas to waste most of your time. [Laughs] All that sort of thought. Where were we?

PLOTKIN: Talking about speeches. And I think—I guess I would just ask about whether there were sort of.... It sounds like there was a kind of highly collaborative atmosphere of a sort at any rate. And I guess a question that I have is, you know, how were interactions? Were there direct interactions when you were working with...?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, if I drafted stuff, it would presumably go to Ted Sorensen.

PLOTKIN: Uh huh.

ARMSTRONG: And then to Kennedy. Maybe it might go to maybe Fred Holborn. I probably would give it to Fred Holborn to take a look at. But there wasn't much pecking order.

PLOTKIN: Yes. And there wasn't much of two people sort of sitting head to head over a sheet of paper?

ARMSTRONG: No.

PLOTKIN: It was more of...

ARMSTRONG: I don't....

PLOTKIN: ...passing things around?

ARMSTRONG: Well, not even a lot of that, not in my experience. I mean I'm not speaking for others. But, no.... I'll say this. I don't know whether it's a appropriate connection or not. Other people who worked more closely with the office should say. But the assumption was that if you were there, you knew what you were doing, and you were good at what you were doing. And if you weren't, you shouldn't be there. And so you had a lot of leeway in terms of how you went about doing what you did and getting what you got. And if it worked, it worked very well. So there weren't a lot of layers through which.... Senate offices were not big in those days.

PLOTKIN: No.

ARMSTRONG: And our office was Ted Sorensen, Mike Feldman, Fred Holborn, and then Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.] who did State stuff. And I mean there were some other people. But, you know....

PLOTKIN: Not the same kind of staff you get today.

ARMSTRONG: Well, no. Nor what you then got when you went to the bureaucracy. No, I mean there weren't a lot of people to clear. And if I gave it to Fred and to Ted, I mean that'd be it. This is for the Senator to do on such-and-such an occasion. See what he thinks. Or, you know, you want something different? Or, you know, here's an alternative. Or here's another approach. But it didn't disappear into the nether. I mean it might or might not be used, you know, depending on whether he did that or not. But then you'd have a file for the next occasion.

PLOTKIN: Right, right.

ARMSTRONG: So, no. I mean Ted and I could talk or Fred and I could talk. Now I think it was very rare, this is, I'm not sure, but I don't think, I think

there were very few occasions on which I would talk with both Fred and Ted. Now they were very different personalities. And I don't know about all the relationship, but it wasn't terribly close. And I don't mean that negatively. And it was interesting, Stephen, because my roommate at the time was working for Senator Gore, Albert Gore's [Albert A. Gore, Jr.] father, the older Senator Gore [Albert Gore, Sr.]. And that office worked entirely differently. Staff did not make independent calls. She couldn't call the State Department to get information about when is Independence Day? I mean she could not make a call, you know, from Senator Gore's office without clearing it or without somebody else doing it who had more whatever. Because it might get used by whoever was at the receiving end to assume that Senator Gore was interested, or they would try to have leverage over Senator Gore, or, you know, something, something.

PLOTKIN: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: Very restrictive. Totally different. I don't think—I started to say I don't think I ever cleared a phone call, but I'm sure that's not true, but...

PLOTKIN: Plainly not to the same degree.

ARMSTRONG: No, no. I mean once it was clear what you were trying to do.... Well, this example of this housing thing for African diplomats is a very good example. I mean I'm just calling the head of the Home and Finance Agency and the D.C. commissioners and people. Getting people to call the White House. I'm sure I made out what I thought I would be doing. But you can't always tell exactly where X is going to end. That was pretty fast, you know, between the first week of August in 1960 when we began and August 28th when Milton Viorst's article came out, and we were ready. And we told him to, I had said, "Don't publish this beforehand." Which his editor was trying to get him to do, you know. Because I'm not ready. The day after your article, I want Senator Hartke's letter to Christian Herter, the Secretary of State, saying the District Commission wants this, and I want the letter to Fred Clarke head of the District Commission, you know, and I want all these things in place: the White House to know from Frances Bolton, you know. And so we had to have all that campaign which I described on the other tape and which is here in the file. But anyway, it was a very different style of office. I don't know whether that in fact—does that jibe with other things that you know or other people's impression of that office?

PLOTKIN: It jibes with a lot of, you know, what I've picked up over time. It jibes with some of what I've heard from the opposite point of view when you were talking about Kennedy's frustration and difficulty with adjusting in the presidency. And he was taken to task by some advisors who said, you know, essentially, you have to learn how to...

ARMSTRONG: You have to, yes.

PLOTKIN: ...delegate and document what you're doing. You can't just turn around and tell somebody to do something because it doesn't work that way.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

PLOTKIN: So that I've heard. And in general his tendency to, he didn't write a lot of stuff down that I've ever been able to find. It's kind of frustrating to researchers. So it does make a lot of sense to me, that he wanted to keep things, keep the bureaucracy or the hierarchy as flat he could. I want to switch gears here, because I want to make sure that we get into this a little bit. I want you to tell me more about the Peace Corps stuff and just about your experience with how that idea came and developed, at least within the Kennedy office and, you know, the Kennedy campaign, if you could.

ARMSTRONG: Okay. Well, I will refer to the file as well. You will see, which you probably already know, that Henry Reuss [Henry S. Reuss], a Democrat congressman from Wisconsin, brought up the idea—I think it was January '60; anyway the date's there—for a Point Four Youth Corps, which was the Peace Corps, in essence. And Hubert Humphrey picked up the idea, discussed Point Four Youth Corps in the spring of '60. And the idea sort of developed traction, you know, more traction, during the campaign, the presidential campaign. So it got on the Kennedy agenda. I don't think—now, again, I don't know—I don't think our office, meaning the Kennedy Senate office, picked up that idea I'm going to say until roughly fall '60. But I do not have the specific, if there is one—there frequently isn't—but I do not have the specific date that he first referred to it or that it began to be developed in the campaign office or whatever. In any case, I am aware that, I mean it was something that interested me. But I don't think.... Well, from where I sat, he did not have input until late summer when, again, there may have been other people involved that I don't even know about. And Harris Wofford was certainly involved, although Harris wasn't part of the Kennedy office at that point, but he was in orbit.

But to answer for myself, so to speak, the people who wanted to do the studies of how this might work came around, you know, and were doing stuff like that. I mean there were a few of them—blessedly not too many—in the file, Maurice Albertson being among the principals of Colorado State University. There was.... But then as it gained traction through the fall and became on the campaign, you know, discussion, then, of course, everybody and his dog got into it. And of course some of the people were very much in favor of the Peace Corps becoming a propaganda instrument for the United States. I mean it's a natural thing for some people to think it's a good idea. [Laughs] I thought it was a terrible idea. And it's not what—I mean using it as a propaganda instrument.

PLOTKIN: Right. Yes.

ARMSTRONG: It's not a good idea for either the people, for either the givers or the recipients, if you can even call them that. I mean this is the kind of

thing that either has to be win-win for both sides, or it ain't going to be for either. And having spent a lot of time in Africa, you know, just in terms of effectiveness and relationships and honesty.... So you will see in *The Nation* article there in the file, which describes a late November 1960 conference at Princeton, in which everybody and his dog who was interested in the Peace Corps was at that conference. And it singled out me in the office of Senator Kennedy for saying, you know, for forwarding certain ideas about how this could be done. Obviously, again, the whole Peace Corps idea developed huge traction. Then the people who were going to administer it, Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] and X, Y, Z, all got into the act.

I'm going to say something aside here. I have been delighted and surprised and delighted and moved to find so many of the things which we developed in the period that I was with the office and the period in the policy campaign used.... Because as you know, we had a whole series of policy groups which included Peace Corps, Africa policy, and those were the two principal ones I worked on in the policy campaign. But I have been very pleased to see a number of the ideas that were then literally, you know, very carefully developed and carried forward in the new administration.⁴ And you will see in a couple of the files, certainly the housing file, that some of the ideas that I and others developed in the fall around that were then picked up by Pedro Sanjuan and Angier Biddle Duke in the Department of Protocol, the furthering of the work with the real estate board. And, you know, you have the press release in the spring of '61. You have another press release from the Department of State in the summer of '61. Those are in the file. Which showed development and progress and moving along. And it's nice to see because so often work that is done in one office, whether it's a Senate office or a campaign office or whatever, is just out the window. I mean nobody ever even sees it, you know, when the next gang comes in.

Some of this was even funnier in certain ways because in the effort around the housing for African diplomats, effort in the very beginning, Wiley Buchanan, who was under Eisenhower the head of Protocol, said, "Oh, it's only the anti-American Africans who are complaining." Which was the trigger to say we in the State Department will have nothing to do with this. And that was one of the reasons I went to Frances Bolton, the Republican from Ohio that I had mentioned to you on the House Subcommittee on Africa, and asked her to go to John Morrow in the White House, who was the brother of Fred Morrow who was the ambassador to Guinea, to get his imprimatur to move ahead on this, or at least express concern for this because we had to—I felt we had to do an end run around Wiley Buchanan. And if the White House said this is a matter of concern to us, then other people are freer to move, you know. So that was part of that strategy, but anyway....

PLOTKIN: Okay. I'm out of the questions I had in the beginning.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, mercy, Stephen Plotkin! You're out of questions! [Laughs]

PLOTKIN: Well, we had a few.

ARMSTRONG: You're at the end of the tape.

⁴ See addendum: Armstrong, Winifred. "Peace Corps Point-4 Youth Corps." *WorldView*. Fall 2008, 14-15.

PLOTKIN: Yes, and we are [unclear] the end of the tape. But I am certain that I am going to wind up with some further questions. And so I [unclear].

ARMSTRONG: Well, you're welcome. And I'm going to push pause and just look quickly at my notes and see if there's other things that I marked when we talked this morning.

PLOTKIN: Sure. Need to be handled.

ARMSTRONG: Well, need. Never a better opportunity. Hang on. [Pause] Some of the files, as I've indicated, go past the end of—between when he left the Senate and went to the White House. And this housing file, for example, is a good one because you can tell that the story went on. And so to know how the story went on, you know, I don't mean it's all there. But it doesn't necessarily end, the files don't necessarily end when basically I no longer was directing the specific activity. Or in many cases I did have a hand in what happened subsequently even though I wasn't part officially....

PLOTKIN: Not on the White House staff or anything.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

PLOTKIN: But still [unclear].

ARMSTRONG: I knew everybody. I mean the work doesn't stop just because—at certain [unclear] it can, but it didn't. Anyway.... Want me to push Stop?

PLOTKIN: Yes, sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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PEACE CORPS POINT-4 YOUTH CORPS

From the office of Senator John Kennedy

by Winifred Armstrong

Winifred Armstrong worked in the office of Senator John F. Kennedy on Peace Corps, Africa and other matters from 1959 to 1960. Ideas about whether there should be a "Peace Corps"—and whose interests it would serve—swirled around Washington at that time. We recently saw the memo she drafted on November 10, 1960 for the incoming Kennedy administration, laying out "questions which should affect consideration and planning" of the Peace Corps program, and asked if we could publish it. Many of the same concerns are still relevant today.



Members of the Senate office staff of Senator John F. Kennedy, 1960. Winifred Armstrong is seated on the floor, first row, extreme left.

Peace Corps – Point-4 Youth Corps

First Draft

Some of the major questions which should affect consideration and planning of this program.

I. AIMS

1. To provide additional manpower for foreign aid programs, at little cost.
2. To educate others with regard to American ideals, by action and pressure.
3. To offer young people an opportunity to learn to understand other countries while serving their own.
4. To fill in existing urgent personnel needs of under-developed countries with qualified young Americans, thus
 - a. Advancing the economic and

social development prerequisite to strengthening democratic institutions.

- b. Providing Americans with inter-cultural experience and opportunity for service at an age when neither status nor career plans interfere with their learning.
- c. Providing opportunity for the establishment of the kind of personal relationships in countries where such relationships are often the measure of national purpose.

II. PLANS WHICH HAVE BEEN SUGGESTED

1. Humphrey Peace Corps.
2. Congressman Reuss – Point-4 Youth Corps.
3. Melady Plan.

Note: The last two of these plans do not tie the program necessarily to the military, and allow for the possibility of extensive cooperation with, and even administration by, private organizations.

III. PRESENT ORGANIZATIONS DOING RELATED WORK

IV. ORGANIZATION OF THE WORK

Any of the following, singly or in combination, might be possible:

- a. American-sponsored and American-administered projects selected in cooperation with foreign national government. Such programs might, or might not, include foreign nations.
- b. Work on foreign national government projects: i.e., teaching in schools, cooperation in community development and health programs, etc. In such cases, Americans might be used individually or in small numbers, to work with foreign nations.
- c. Voluntary organizations, both American, indigenous and other: These would, of course, be decided on in cooperation with the foreign national government, but might include mission and other non-governmental Agents of each.

V. AMOUNT OF TRAINING

- a. Skills: necessary to ascertain how many people having what particular skills, will be necessary in each country. Should the program include the teaching of skills, or take only those who already have them? Should, for example, people going

- to teach English be given special training in English teaching to people with foreign languages?
- b. Orientation: How much should be in the U.S.; how much in the foreign country or area?
What should orientation include?

VI. MILITARY

To include the Peace Corps as part of a military program will almost certainly:

1. Increase the amount of bureaucratic delay and red-tape.
2. Be likely to take away from the technical assistance – service emphasis – of the program, both in the U.S. and probably in the interpretation given to the program by other countries.

General Hershey indicated in a letter to the I.C.A., when funds were appropriated for the study of this project, that he approved the project, but hoped they would not take a hard and fast stand on the military aspects. He indicated that it would almost certainly be possible to arrange that Draft Boards exempt acceptable applicants to the Peace Corps without making the program an alternative to military service.

VII. SELECTION

1. Qualifications
2. Process

VIII. ADMINISTRATION BY WHOM

Possible cooperative agreements: voluntary organizations, U.S. government.

(One suggestion has been made that a separate non-government organization administer the program, with money for at least transportation, and possibly salary, provided by the U.S. Government.)

Would foreign governments be able to contribute to salary if participants were working in foreign government schools, health projects, etc.?

What would foreign governments be asked to provide in the way of housing, facilities, transportation within the country, etc.?

IX. POSSIBLE TYPES OF PROJECTS

1. Community and Village Planning and Development (Schools, Bath-Houses, Houses, Community Centers)
2. Sanitation (Wells, Malaria Control, Latrines)
3. Agriculture (Animal Husbandry, Crops, Irrigation, Soils, Poultry)
4. Home Economics (Foods and Nutrition, Clothing, Mother and Child Care, Gardening)
5. Nursing (Practical Nursing, Midwifery, Nursing)
6. Engineering (Irrigation, Flood Control, Surveying, Highways, Water Supply)
7. Literacy and Adult Education.
8. Youth Organizations (4-H, Scouts, Recreation, Physical Development)
9. Recreation, Handicrafts, and Leisure Time Activities
10. Vocational Education
11. Trades and Industry
12. Social Welfare (Orphanages, Homes for the Aged, Welfare Agencies, Homes for the Blind)
13. Secretarial
14. Medical Services (Medical Technicians, Laboratory Assistants, Doctors' Assistants)
15. Cultural Education (Literature, Arts, Music, Historical)

X. PRELIMINARY INFORMATION NECESSARY BEFORE PROGRAM CAN BEGIN

It will probably be necessary to ascertain by direct contact, rather than by mail, the total need and types of positions in each under-developed country which might be filled by young American personnel. It is almost impossible to develop such information by mail. I.C.A. has indicated that it would be unwise to use their personnel to obtain such information. (Field personnel would be unlikely to be enthusiastic about such a project, particularly since their role is generally advisory or technical, and not operative. They also feel that such a project, even if it should become part of I.C.A., should be handled as a separate project, and not as a part of their already-existing program.)

XI. ADDITIONAL FACTORS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Is a Point-4 Youth Corps practical and advisable?
2. In what types of projects might they be used?
3. In what manner could private groups, religious groups, and government agencies cooperate with such a project?
4. Should service in such a Youth Corps be accepted in lieu of military service?
5. What would be the optimum size of the Corps?
6. How would participants be selected and then supervised?
7. What orientation and training, both in the U.S. and abroad, would be recommended for corpsmen?
8. What should be the educational level for corps members?
9. Should there be an age range and limitation, and if so, what?
10. Should corps be administered by the U.S. Government or by private agencies, or both?
11. How could such a Youth Corps best support existing programs (government and private) of technical cooperation?
12. How could such a program be coordinated with all interested individuals, groups, organizations, and agencies?
13. What are the existing training and orientation programs in the U.S. and abroad, and how can these best be coordinated and integrated in to this program?
14. What degree of specialization and technical training is desirable for members of such a Youth Corps?
15. In what types of work might corpsmen be used? (Common labor, skilled labor, advisor, etc.)
16. What previous work of a similar nature has been carried out?
17. What should constitute the minimum essential living conditions for corpsmen living in villages, with respect to food, shelter, and sanitation as may be necessary to maintain health?