

Philip D. Sprouse Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 12/19/1969
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Philip D. Sprouse (1906-1977) served as a Foreign Service Inspector for the US State Department (1959-1962) before becoming the Ambassador to Cambodia (1962-1964). This interview focuses on Sprouse's own views of Norodom Sihanouk, the United States' shaky diplomatic relations with nations of the Indochinese Peninsula, and tensions between Sprouse and the Department of State, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

PHILIP D. SPROUSE

December 19, 1969
Orinda, California

By Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, one of the things that I've heard from other people, talking in terms of the embassies, not only in Phnom Penh but also other places like Bangkok as well as Saigon, is that there was at one point friction between these embassies. Did you ever have any problems in which people in your embassy -- or did situations develop in which there was difficulty between your embassy and other embassies in Southeast Asia, particularly Bangkok and Saigon?

SPROUSE: When I was in Phnom Penh Fritz Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] was the ambassador in Saigon, and the only possible

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point of friction you might have heard -- I might add, it did not exist -- was in connection with a problem which concerned the two countries where Washington had to take a position. And you always felt that -- we went into this rather thoroughly in our last discussion. You always felt that if Diem, in any of those incidents involving the South Vietnamese troops, usually accompanied by Americans, crossing the border into Cambodia, resulting in either damage or actual wounding or killing in Cambodia -- if in those situations Diem would immediately say -- Diem of course, should have become immediately in charge

as these things happened, as far as this was a possibility in Saigon -- if Diem would have said, "of course, this is contrary to my orders. It's something we would deplore greatly, if our troops crossed the border and caused casualties among Cambodians or damage in Cambodia. And I would certainly support the idea of having an investigating commission composed of representatives of both countries and perhaps American participation. And if the investigation

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reveals that we were responsible, then I'd be willing to make suitable amends by way of apology and compensation." But never once did you get any indication that Diem was willing to accept any responsibility or make any amends, apologies, or pay anything.

And so when we sent our recommendations, usually out of Cambodia, on these things, we recognized the problem Saigon had. And of course, this really affected the U.S. position; it wasn't just an ambassador or just the embassy itself. And so we tried to phrase our recommendations against that background so that we wouldn't be put in the position of being so damn parochial we couldn't see the other side. And Fritz Nolting took this in the same way in which we did it. And Fritz quite often, I thought, did a very good job of trying to persuade Diem to do the right thing on this thing, although Diem never did it. So I had no feeling of any friction whatsoever between the embassy in Phnom Penh and the embassy in Saigon while I was there .

Now, the embassy at Bangkok -- I think the only thing I can think of

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is one point -- this is the only one. The three ambassadors had a meeting with Alex Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] at one point in Saigon, discussing the problems of the three countries, but primarily Saigon. And Ken Young [Kenneth T. Young], who was Ambassador at that point, made a record of the conversation, the discussion that went on, and then did a dispatch on it, sending it from Bangkok. But instead of sending it over to me or to Fritz with a sort of, "This is my recollection of what you said," he sent it right in as an official dispatch without any clearance whatsoever. And it put me in the light of making outlandish statements that I hadn't even thought of making, much less having made them. And it irritated the daylight out of me because this wasn't the way you operate anything.

I sent back a very short, calculated thing -- Bangkok. I don't know whether I did it in a letter or a dispatch -- to Alex Johnson saying that this was a complete distortion of what I'd said. I'd not even had that thought much less said it. And this is

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the only friction that I knew, although Ken Young, I think, had a tendency to be a little bit of a proconsul, sort of acting as the proconsul for the area. But this is on this particular case.

And then Ken Young, or the embassy at Bangkok, would never be willing, as Fritz Nolting in Saigon was, really to sort of -- even when the Department instructed from time to

time -- to approach the Thais to do the things they ought to do vis-a-vis Cambodia. But this was an underlying sort of friction, it never really surfaced or anything. It was just something that we observed in Phnom Penh and felt that Young, particularly since he was instructed to do this from time to time, should have done a better job with the Thais on this. And in the long run, this might have made our position in Cambodia better. But again we recognized -- he said, "I haven't forsaken you in one of these things" --- that we were allied under SEATO with both the Thais and with the Vietnamese in their war; Sihanouk was neutral. So you couldn't pound the table and say, "For God's sakes, do these things," because the

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greater prize for us, of course, and the greater stake was in the other two countries, not in Cambodia.

O'BRIEN: The feeling that Young became a little too friendly with the Thais, did you ever see that?

SPROUSE: No, that I couldn't say. I'm speaking of this only in terms of dealing with questions affecting Cambodia that Young was not as willing to sort of force the issue with the Thais on something that affected Cambodia in the way that I felt he should have. And the Department had quite often sent out instructions to do this, but he almost never did. This is the only episode I get. All the rest of it, what he did, of course, this was not my business, and I didn't have enough knowledge to know. And I certainly wouldn't say that he was too friendly with the Thais on that score.

This is always a problem that any ambassador has in a foreign country. If he is completely acceptable to that foreign country, he must remember that the role that he plays is not that of winning a popularity contest,

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because in the long run, even if they don't like what you say, you represent your country and not the country to which you're accredited. And this happens, I think, more with political ambassador types than career people; the idea of getting everything you can out of Washington, you know, in terms of aid, building up a record so that you can be taken as a friend of that country to which you are accredited. I think this is just human nature, but it does happen.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about the embassy in Vientiane?

SPROUSE: I had no.... You see, there were no problems between Cambodia and Laos that surfaced while I was there. We were certainly observers of each other's problems. And of course, we received their telegrams, and they received ours. Sihanouk was very kindly disposed and favorably disposed toward Souvanna Phouma, and so, of course, this made for a pleasant and easy relationship between Laos and Cambodia.

See, Sihanouk wasn't always batting out publicly all over the place accusing the Laotians of anything, as he was continually

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accusing the Thais and the Vietnamese of something.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the 1960's -- in fact, in our last conversation we talked a little bit about the problem of the many people who in some way or another with their careers had been associated with China. What's happened to the old China corps, in a sense, by 1960? Where are they? How many of them are left? And are you still facing some of the internal problems within the Department of State and within the government of the United States of a certain hostility or distrust?

SPROUSE: That, I don't know. I don't think that any of the pre-war Chinese language students are still active. I think Tony Freeman [Fulton Freeman] was the last, and Tony retired at the beginning of this year. I take that back. There's one more who's still active, James Penfield. Penfield's last job, as I knew it, was an inspector in the Inspection Corps. And he was Ambassador to Iceland at one point and Deputy Assistant Secretary for both Far Eastern Affairs and African Affairs. A very able

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man. Penfield is the only officer of that vintage who's still active, still in the Service.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about 1961, during the Kennedy Administration? Were there many?

SPROUSE: Well, as I said in the last conversation we had, none of the China people had ever been considered for appointment as ambassadors, chiefs of mission but when the Kennedy Administration came in, first, Penfield, I think, or Freeman, and second, the other of the two, and then, finally, my name was sent up. Our names were sent up for nomination as chiefs of mission. But before that, none of the China people had been appointed anything. I take that back, there was one, Horace Smith. I'd forgotten about Horace Smith. Horace Smith was Ambassador to Laos at some point.

O'BRIEN: Yes, he was before.

SPROUSE: Yes, and this was before. I'd forgotten about Horace because Horace got out of the China field so long ago and stayed away so long that I sort of forgot that Horace was a Chinese language student at one

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point in Peking.

O'BRIEN: Well, this, in a sense, hostility that was there, was this a result of people like Walter Robertson...

SPROUSE: I don't think Walter Robertson had a thing to do with it at all.

O'BRIEN: ...in the fifties?

SPROUSE: I don't think Walter Robertson had anything to do with it at all. Of course, we had no posts in China so this wasn't a case of sending people to posts in China. Obviously, they didn't send any of these people to Taipei. I think John Foster Dulles played a great part in it. Maybe people within the Department, top administrative personnel, felt that it was unwise -- and I got this picture at one point -- felt it was unwise to send to the Senate for confirmation the names of people who had been specialists in the field of Chinese affairs before the war. So consequently, none of them were sent. And I was told at one point by the -- which shows you how far this went --

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Inspector General when I became an Inspector that he was given orders that I was not to inspect posts in Asia. That was an unbelievable statement, but this is what he told me. Of course, he got this from on high. I wouldn't say it was the Secretary of State, either, but this is.... This shows you that still as late as -- because I became an Inspector in 1959 -- that as late as 1959 you still had this feeling on the part of the responsible administrative personnel people in the Department who weren't Chinese specialists themselves or Asia specialists at all. And I'm convinced that this came because they felt there would be a reaction, a critical reaction, on the part of Congress. But when the Kennedy Administration came in, all this changed; Congress hadn't changed, basically. The Kennedy Administration ignored this.

O'BRIEN: Well, we talked a little bit, too, about the Wriston program for the Department, the Wristonization in a sense, which, of course, was earlier. But how

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is the progress of this movement in 1961 in your dealing with the Foreign Service? You had some rather critical things to say about it.

SPROUSE: Well, I think earlier the weakness of the thing was sort of willy-nilly blanket everyone into the Foreign Service whether they wanted to be in the Foreign Service or whether they should have been in the Foreign Service as career officers. This included people in the Department of State who were very competent, highly skilled officers, who would have been an asset to the Service. But a lot of them didn't want to serve abroad. And we got a wealth of talent out of this program -- the War Manpower Act,

first, followed by the Writson program. And this is the pattern that all foreign offices all over the world followed: that people are interchanged between foreign offices and the field.

But it also brought into the Foreign Service, and I have explained this previously, people who really shouldn't have been career officers in the Foreign Service because they would inevitably

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suffer from a standpoint of competition with officers who had better qualifications and who were better educated and better trained than they. And it meant you were sacrificing the Foreign Service Staff Corps, which had a role to play. Finally, I think during the Kennedy Administration, this was revived -- I mean so you had the voluntary Staff Corps revived. If you bring in people who couldn't stand the competition with officers, they would sooner or later be selected out. And I think a lot of them didn't want it themselves, but felt they had no choice a lot of the Staff Corps people.

And in the process, you got highly trained people in the administrative field. I'm not being just critical to the administrative. ... It means you had many first rate people in the administrative field who had the competence to move into substantive work and vice versa. You were an asset to the Service. When they were senior people, this is something else. But this is the people at the lower levels, the beginning level of the administrative

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field. And these were jobs which were done better by people who stayed in them year after year, instead of sort of going _____ out a first rate _____ general _____ officer who had a great _____ offer a _____ into something which he _____ qualifications for or real interest _____ I think _____ has been ironed out a great deal since then and it began changing under the _____.

O'BRIEN: _____ to another thing, in regard to _____ a fourteen nation conference _____ integrity and the _____ guides the United States' _____.

SPROUSE: 1, in the first place, Sihanouk wanted an outright, _____ and out guarantee, which meant that if the Communists moved into his country, we would be obligated, committed to go to war to save Sihanouk's country. Now, I parted company with those people who saw the SEATO treaty as the justification for our position in Vietnam, because Sihanouk was

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covered by the same umbrella, that some little protocol, that applied to Vietnam. So consequently, if we considered ourselves committed in Vietnam, to go to the defense of

Vietnam because of either external or internal aggression, we could have used the same formula for Sihanouk.

Now whether Sihanouk would have accepted this formula or not is something else, because Sihanouk made clear after the Third World sort of emerged following the Bandung Conference that he did not want to be protected by this protocol of the SEATO treaty. But we never tried this out on Sihanouk during those days when he was calling this conference. And if we had I'm not sure that Sihanouk's reaction would have been favorable because I think what Sihanouk wanted was a conference whereby he would get a guarantee, not only from us, but simultaneously from the communists themselves, which could commit them. And this was logical.

The reason that we were reluctant to do this -- and I was instructed to tell Sihanouk this at one point -- is that this would require

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the action of the Senate and a treaty if we were going to commit ourselves to come to his defense if he were attacked by some external force, and this was a commitment which you didn't take lightly.

O'BRIEN: Did we change our response and interest in that at all when Sihanouk began to get support on this from other nations, particularly the Russians?

SPROUSE: No, we were never willing to meet him on the guarantee thing. This was a real stumbling block. And of course, Sihanouk for obvious reasons aborted this conference and we were just not willing to make the commitment. And I think we were reluctant really to participate in the conference, because what would it achieve if you had these powers which... Of course, it met on Laos and of course one of the things that made it difficult was that you looked at Laos when you had the agreement, and of course, they moved in immediately and started aiding North Vietnam through the trails of Laos. And so what purpose would be served by getting in another one of these things where

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the last one had sort of begun to break down and where the international control division of the three countries was really not completely effective -- completely ineffective in Vietnam, and you might say relatively ineffective in Laos. And we had one in Cambodia which was sort of served some purpose, but wasn't really completely effective either. The Communists always had a veto on everything that was done.

O'BRIEN: I understand that there's a good deal of friction that arises over aid questions, for example, aid to Cambodia. The Thais, of course, are always rather critical of some of the aid, particularly in 1962, as I understand it. Did you ever get involved in that controversy at all?

SPROUSE: Well, the Thais were critical because everything that we gave Cambodia, of course, they, in fact, felt that we were giving to what they considered to be a country which was hostile to their interests, in their opinion. And Sihanouk at one point had wanted jet planes. There was no real reason for Cambodia to have jet planes because of the

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size of the country. No obvious target. And if we'd given jets to Sihanouk, I'm sure that we'd have a very deep seated reaction from the Thais and the South Vietnamese also. But this was always the problem because Sihanouk, on the other hand, charged us always with "over-arming" -- and this is his phrase, "over-arming" -- the Thais. So we got this on both sides, but we never got.... We went into the cross fire ourselves as such because after all you could recognize the reasons for the reaction of the Thais; you could recognize the reasons for the reaction of Sihanouk without really agreeing with either one of them.

O'BRIEN: Did General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] ever get involved in this?

SPROUSE: No, General Taylor came to Cambodia once while I was there on a mission, one of his fact finding missions. And, of course, we all received him, had a nice conversation, briefed him and so forth.

O'BRIEN: What do you recall from the fact finding mission? Was this the one in 1961?

SPROUSE: Couldn't have been '61. The earlier one...

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O'BRIEN: In '62, right. Had to be '62.

SPROUSE: The earlier one that he was out for hours which results, I think, in the build-up at the mission in Saigon. This is after the Kennedy Administration though, wasn't it?

O'BRIEN: It could very well have been. Well, he came out in the fall of '61 which, of course, could not be the one that we're talking about.

SPROUSE: It was not the Kennedy Administration, was it?

O'BRIEN: And I think you're right. It was after.

SPROUSE: It was the second one that was in the Kennedy Administration because I was in Cambodia at that point, but I don't remember whether it was '61 or '63, but

I was there, a member. But I had had no particular effect on Vietnam one way or the other. I mean it might have given Washington a new insight, a new look at it, but had no effect on our policy one way or the other.

O'BRIEN: Did he ever meet Sihanouk?

SPROUSE: Oh, yes. I can show you pictures of his calling on Sihanouk. Sihanouk gave him a nice some kind of urn. That was a gift and so forth.

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O'BRIEN: How did they react to each other?

SPROUSE: Oh, very well, very well. General Taylor speaks decent French, and so their conversation went along beautifully. And General Taylor was a nationally known, well known figure around the world. And a very attractive and pleasing personality too.

O'BRIEN: We were talking about people and we talked a good deal about Sihanouk. What kind of a person is Nong Kimny?

SPROUSE: The ambassador in Washington?

O'BRIEN: Right. And was later foreign minister, wasn't he?

SPROUSE: Not while I was there. Not while I was there. He left Washington and went as ambassador to India and I don't know what happened to him after that. I would say that he was their top diplomatic representative abroad, a man of great charm and sincerity and earnestness and had a gentle quality and I think an impressive man who had influence over Sihanouk. Only a few people who probably did. Because there was an honesty and decency about him. I think he was a very pleasing and impressive man, able and intelligent, who represented his country well in Washington without being

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so partisan and so critical, you know, that he would end his usefulness. And yet at the same time he represented Cambodian interests. And he was in contrast to their then Foreign Minister, Huot Sambath, I think is his name, who later headed their delegation to the UN. But Huot Sambath was so partisan, so, you know, parroting the line. And he wasn't the kind of a man that Nong Kimny was. I don't think he was ever as well received or as highly regarded, nearly as highly regarded as Nong Kimny was.

O'BRIEN: Of other political leaders in Cambodia, who leaves a strong impression on you from your time there?

SPROUSE: Well, one man, who is probably the most effective man in the government. God, I can see his face and can't remember his name now. But this man had successively been Chief of Staff, Minister of Defense, Foreign Minister, Prime Minister. He'd been everything in the government and a tremendous doer, active as could be. And he was very active in their negotiations at the time after Dien Ben Phou and the Geneva Conference for the Cambodian delegation. Perhaps he did. At that point he may have been

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Foreign Minister. And I can see his face but can't remember the name now. But this was one of the most impressive men. Another one of the most impressive men was their Chief of Staff and Minister of Defense while I was there, a man named Lon Nol, L-O-N N-O-L, Lon Nol, who was not effervescent and not bubbling over, very reserved, but gave the measure of great strength and determination and a sense of competence and didn't waste any words. But this man, there was no doubt about his being the top military figure in the country.

O'BRIEN: Getting back to this whole question of military aid for a while too, just shortly before the assassination Sihanouk renounces the aid. Well, what are his objections? Are they objections basically on the way it's administered? Are they political objections? What are the major factors?

SPROUSE: These are the loose ends I think we'd left before. This grew out really of the scene in Saigon when Diem and Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu] were assassinated. And just about this time you had a revival of these broadcasts by this Khmer Serei,

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Free Cambodian group under Son Ngoc Thanh, calling for the overthrow of Sihanouk.

And at this point, Sihanouk, of course, was in Phnom Penh rather than being in France where he always went this time of year, because no one knew what these developments in Saigon were going to mean in terms of the outcome in Saigon and maybe something in Cambodia. And Sihanouk and his people were convinced -- the Foreign Minister told me flatly this as I flatly denied the Foreign Minister -- that CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] had engineered the overthrow of Diem and Nhu and their assassination. And Son Ngoc Thanh started calling for a military -- an uprising in Cambodia and the overthrow of Sihanouk. Sihanouk is capable of such suspicion, such paranoid, that while we thought it was fanciful -- could hardly believe that anyone would give any credibility to this. And he may well have thought that we were on the verge of launching something across the borders. And so when this emissary of this Khmer Serei came across, thinking that he had a free conduct pass of some kind for some kind of negotiation, Sihanouk

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grabbed him, arrested him, put him on trial, a public trial which went on day after day, at which he confessed to all sorts of crimes, complicity with the Americans. We were arming the Khmer Serei and so forth. And I think at this point Sihanouk just believed that we were out to do everything we could to undercut him.

And it was fanciful to us with no basis in fact whatsoever, but when he made the charges and when this so-called spy or agent got up and gave evidence which indicated that there was substance to his charges, Sihanouk then began to make speeches day after day bitterly castigating us, accusing us of every evil crime that's possible to mankind: the number one enemy of Cambodia, number one enemy of mankind, the number one imperialist power in the world, the number one enemy of all freedom loving people, peace loving people and so forth. And then came this note from the foreign office, this sort of a crescendo had risen up, calling us to end our aid and withdraw our aid missions and saying that even one more dollar of American aid would be an insult to the country.

And this is the beginning

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of the end of our position. We got the aid missions out in record time. It was a masterful operation I thought, because you just don't dismantle a military and economic aid mission that was the fabulous, compromising several hundred people, suddenly get them out of the country and dismantle all your organization -- question of where these people went, personnel changes, problems, civil effects, transportation of the whole office. This is something you don't do overnight. And we got out in record time. I think it was done in at the very most a month or maybe less. Of course, a lot of these People went temporarily to Bangkok. Some of them went to Saigon.

And the upshot of it was that this was the beginning of the end of our role in their problems, although we stayed on because we were still... And I might add, that Sihanouk was still exceedingly pleasant and charming to me. I left the following March; this started in December. I think our aid missions were finally dismantled and all out in January. And the following March I left to go to the Philippines to have an operation -- Air Force base hospital. That

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was March 1964 and it wasn't until May of '65, I think, that Sihanouk broke relations with us. So we stayed in for another year after -- even more. You might say almost a year and a half after our aid mission were withdrawn.

O'BRIEN: Well, after the words were exchanged and the bitterness had developed were there any master plans in a sense of restoring Cambodian-U.S. relations in that following year while you were still there?

SPROUSE: While I'm still there?

O'BRIEN: Yeah.

SPROUSE: Well, relations weren't broken. As long as I was there, except for the aid missions, relations were more or less normal and we still had our contacts with the government. We still had an embassy. And we still had USIS [United States Information Service]. I might add that you didn't embarrass Cambodians by inviting Cambodians around to your place as often as you had before because this is sort of awkward to them. Now that you resented them. But it might have been sort of awkward for them to be seeing much of the American so this represented a certain strain in your situation.

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But if Sihanouk would give a party or something, the American ambassador was invited along with the other ambassadors. In other words, there was continuation of formal relations in every sense of the word except the existence of your aid missions.

O'BRIEN: Well, you have quite a good deal of difficulty come up too about President Kennedy's death. And as I understand it, the Cambodians make some remarks that are interpreted in a very stern way.

SPROUSE: Well, this was the broadcast. I think we went into that rather thoroughly before. There's not really much to add to that. I don't think there's anything to add to that because the Cambodians, in essence, denied that they'd made such a broadcast. Of course, I carried this to the Prime Minister, Prince Kant [Norodom Kant] Sihanouk's cousin. And he investigated and came back with the reply that no such broadcast had occurred. And while we knew that it had because we'd monitored the broadcast in Cambodia when they officially denied it, I mean you were at an impasse for what you should do at that point.

O'BRIEN: Let's pass on to some aid questions. Sihanouk

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objected from time to time to strings that were attached to various aid programs. What was he talking about in terms of strings or what were some of the things that were particularly...

SPROUSE: I don't remember that Sihanouk objected to any strings while I was there. Can't think of any. We did have one problem which was -- I take that back. We did have one problem, because as you know, we always had the problem of comingling of our aid with that of the Communist countries. And we had a rather good program going. We were drilling wells to provide fresh water to villages in the rural areas. And the Cambodians at some point began to get some Russian well digging drills and were, in a sense, using those almost incorporated in our program. And so you added a question on

the comingling of Communist aid and ours. Well, our recommendation to Washington, of course, was simply to ignore it, because we could absorb the damn things and it would still be our program because it would be achieving that aim that we wanted, which was to bring fresh water to these villages. And our aid was the

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predominant part of the effort. But because of Congressional restraint on this thing, it became a problem.

And we had some aid inspectors out in Cambodia at one point. He warned us to have a showdown with the Cambodians or we'd stop their aid immediately, unless they did this. And I argued this thing. It rather infuriated me, because I argued that we should first see what we were trying to achieve in Cambodia and not get ourselves tied up in knots, because this could become an issue and be detrimental to our program instead of assisting us in achieving what we were trying to achieve. And Washington, of course, because of Congressional feeling on this, would not go along with us.

And finally, I was dealing with one of the Cabinet Ministers on this, I think the Minister of Economic Affairs? I forget the Cabinet Minister's name, but a very able, competent man, moderate man. And I told him that we didn't want to make an issue of this thing in the sense of having a show-down, that we'd rather stop the thing quietly and sort of ease out of it became a problem to him that he couldn't

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solve, because the last thing we want to do is have an issue which would become an issue of serious importance and import and do damage to our relations between the two countries. And I think before this thing was finally settled, of course, the aid program itself ended. But this was building up to a cause celebre all for no reason whatsoever except the fact that the Russians and somebody in the Cambodian government.... And I think they'd bought these things. I'm not even sure that they have given them to the Russians. And of course, if the Russians had been clever, they would have done this on every facet of activity in which we were engaged in Cambodia. They could have wrecked our aid program. So to me it didn't make much sense. But this was a very....And this was a restriction, a restraint or strain as Sihanouk would say and one that he resented.

And there may have been something on the military side. I forget. There may have been something on the military side that Sihanouk was unhappy about. I sort of faintly have this in the back of my mind, but I can't get the details now. Some have slipped my

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mind.

O'BRIEN: Well, passing on to some administrative things. Did anyone ever suggest the Peace Corps as a possibility for Cambodia?

SPROUSE: We had, under our aid program, we had the IVS [International Voluntary Services] which was a poor man's Peace Corps which I think achieved the same purpose at considerably less cost than the Peace Corps. And these young men had the same motivation, had the same general training and background, and they made the contribution which I think was ultimately good. So we never really tried to introduce the Peace Corps while I was there. Whether we had earlier or not, I don't know. But these people served the same purpose and contributed something. No doubt about it.

O'BRIEN: Did the country team idea work well for you?

SPROUSE: Beautifully, I thought. I was very pleased with it. I really don't know why this thing wasn't thought of years ago, because it makes so much sense when you get the top people in your setup. And no man can be so expert that he's expert in every field of

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activity for he had authority. And I leaned very heavily on my excellent deputy, two first rate aid chiefs. Both of them were good. The two top people in our aid program I had a high regard for, very competent. And there were no prima donnas, nobody trying to screw off anybody else or to make, you know, a name or something. I must say I've never done that in a group, almost in my entire foreign service career. [Inaudible] Yes, they were competent men in their field.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have any real problems with anyone in that, going over your head or around you to Washington...

SPROUSE: No.

O'BRIEN: ...or are you kept very well informed on what went on.

SPROUSE: I don't think that we were agreed although on every point, but I certainly never had any feeling that.... I might add, there was one thing which I'm really not at liberty to discuss. I think maybe at one point I had a different opinion on a CIA

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representative on one thing which I myself sent back to Washington. And I think I got Washington's backing on this one. It was the only one and it wasn't a major problem, but it was enough to warrant a decision in Washington.

O'BRIEN: How about the embassy? Were relations with the rest of the embassy pretty

good?

SPROUSE: Within our embassy?

O'BRIEN: Within your own embassy.

SPROUSE: I think so, to the extent that you always feel -- I always felt this -- that you can't sort of ignore the people on the staff regardless of what position you yourself are in. And the supervisor has a responsibility for taking an interest in his staff and having some concern about morale on the staff. And I've always felt this very strongly because I've noticed that chiefs that I've had in the past who to me sort of set an example to me on this sort of thing. And when you had chiefs of that calibre, you always inevitably had much better morale on the staff than if somebody paid no attention and couldn't care less what happened to his staff. So the extent that

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any chief can fine out, you know, the attitude of his staff, I think on the whole that morale was good. I don't know of any examples of it not being. Maybe one isolated case or two or something. Personality problems rather than personnel problems.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about the Department now? Did you feel you were always in tune with the Department's thinking on Cambodia or was there any time that you came into some real difficulties?

SPROUSE: More or less, although I thought the Department too often departed from what I always considered professionalism by deciding something without asking advice and then sending you out instructions to do something which you didn't agree with at all. If I had a chance, I would sort of fire back and say I didn't agree with it. On this particular case I remember when they told both Charlie Yost [Charles W. Yost] in New York to go to the Cambodian ambassador who was also head of their delegation to the UN and told me to go to either Sihanouk or the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister and inform the Cambodians

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That their actions had been barbaric and uncivilized. I mean if they for one minute had asked me my advice on it I would have said a flat no, but they didn't, and Charlie Yost had already taken the action before I could do anything, and it had been, of course, reported back to Sihanouk. This is something that the Department does from time to time. And it depends on the area. It depends on the field. Also it might depend on the ambassador. I don't think they did this to David Bruce, for instance, if you know what I mean.

But this, to me, is not good professional tactics. I think the Department -- and I can be critical of the Department on this -- should always.... If you don't trust the man with you,

withdraw him. Send somebody else. But on something that's very important, I think it's always well to ask the man on the spot, because that's what he's there for. And if he's not good enough, change him. Send someone who is good enough.

O'BRIEN: Well, in those years you have a number of people that are Assistant Secretary for Far East:

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Parsons [J. Graham Parsons], McConaughy [Walter P. McConaughy], Harriman [W. Averell Harriman], and Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.]. How do you remember these people and your dealings with them? Of course, you were basically...

SPROUSE: Well, Harriman was Assistant Secretary when I went out. And then he was succeeded by Roger Hilsman. Those are the only two that date in my period. And I had no real sense of rapport with Harriman because....If you had mentioned Walt Butterworth [William Walton Butterworth, Jr.] I could have sat down and written a personal letter about many things and gotten a response, a reaction to it. But I never had this relationship with Hariman. No. I didn't. With Hilsman I had exchange of letter once or twice, but only.... But I never had any with Harriman at all.

O'BRIEN: Did you get the idea that they were interested in what your thinking was on Cambodia?

SPROUSE: Not particularly. Not particularly. This was the unprofessionalism that I was talking about earlier because I think if you'd had professionals at that level in the Department, you might have had a different

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picture.

O'BRIEN: How about Janow [Seymour J. Janow], this fellow by the name of Seymour Janow that's in a sense, as I understand it, head of all the aid programs in Southeast Asia at this point, isn't he?

SPROUSE: Oh, yes. I'd forgotten. I remember his name now. I'd just forgotten it. I don't register. I just remember the name.

O'BRIEN: I'm sorry, I've forgotten did Robert Kennedy come to Phnom Penh while you were there?

SPROUSE: No. Never did.

O'BRIEN: Well, I think we've pretty well covered it, unless you can think of some things that should be included above and beyond what we've talked about or anything that perhaps needs to be gone into a little more.

SPROUSE: No. Just to come back to sort of sum up. There are two things that I think are sort of basic to this whole, our position during that period. One is that the opposition in Cambodia was directly and most importantly affected by our position in Vietnam. And regardless of what we did in Cambodia, regardless

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of what our policies were.... As it shows it here we gave him three hundred and seven million dollars in aid. Couldn't care less. It went right down the drain; kicked the missions out because of the situation in Vietnam which affected, he thought, in the long run his own country. And this was much more important to him than even maybe a billion dollars in aid. And so this was the decisive factor which affected our relations with Cambodia during that period and which I think still do.

The other thing is that Sihanouk, regardless of what he says, and he says an awful lot, is not pro-Communist. He is not pro-Peking or pro-Hanoi. He's pro-Sihanouk, pro-Cambodia and he is motivated solely by what he thinks will rebound to the good of his own country. He wants to save it as an independent unity. And these are the two basic factors of the situation. And regardless of what we might have done during that period vis-a-vis Cambodia -- if we'd had no aid, if we'd had a lot of aid. We did have a lot of aid. It didn't seem really to affect

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decisively the outcome. And you go back again to the price we are paying for Vietnam, and then double it. And of course, if we'd been winning, I'd think we'd have no difficulties with Sihanouk at all.

O'BRIEN: Well, on that note, do you think it was possible, perhaps had we been winning, to keep good relations with all three of these nations: Thailand, Cambodia and South Vietnam at the same time?

SPROUSE: We were winning but it's almost like trying to mix fire and water, so to speak. I mean our major concerns were, of course, first Vietnam and almost equally important Bangkok. And a country which was taking a neutral position which was third or fourth which was not willing really to cooperate with us in achieving what we were trying to cooperate, it had to take a second seat in the whole picture, which was logical. He must have understood this himself, because Sihanouk is a very bright and savvy man. So consequently I think we did everything we could to maintain good relations with all three but it was beyond our capacities.

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O'BRIEN: Have you seen him since you left Cambodia?

SPROUSE: No, but he sent a message when I was in the hospital. No, I think he sent the message after I got back to Washington, expressing his best wishes for the continuation of my, I think what he called my "brilliant career." And all you could say was, "Don't have to make it more brilliant at this point." [Laughter] No, a fascinating character. I'll never forget him to my dying day. And you must have a -- which I think people did -- great admiration for Sihanouk because his interests were his own country which is what our interests were and ever were and are supposed to be. And the fact that he didn't do things we wanted to do is something else. But you had to have great admiration for this man because his resources were limited. He welded his own country together. There was unity. Of course, he's had increasing difficulties as the years have gone on. And his sense of priorities wasn't, in fact, all what it should be, but then who are we to talk about a sense of priorities.

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O'BRIEN: I got the impression that you felt that Sihanouk in a sense had played a kind of game with not only yourself, but with other nations, and he's a very, very shrewd person in the way that he played it.

SPROUSE: Well, personally Sihanouk was always very charming and kind to all the ambassadors. Never once was he impolite, discourteous or rude in any way. He might be towards your country and its policies but not toward you personally. And when he was boarding up during that period, we heard one of the broadcasts he made and he paid tribute to General Sherallon, to my predecessor, Ambassador Trimble [William C. Trimble], and to me, but then said something about some American he was very critical of -- it was Martin Herz, I think. Hertz, who was a [Foreign Service] officer there at one point back in the fifties, had written a short history of Cambodia. Hertz was a very intelligent and able man. It's a very credible job. But Herz in his book had pointed out that Son Ngoc Thanh, this ex-Prime Minister, you know, had contributed

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towards the independence, and this infuriated Sihanouk. So every chance Sihanouk got he would always make remarks in public speeches critical of Herz. I think at one point he wouldn't even see that Herz was having a visa for reentry into the country. Now he even said this publicly, that he was annoyed about it somewhat.

So Sihanouk in his personal relations with people couldn't have been more charming even during the rest of this period when we were undergoing every difficulty. So it wasn't anything personal on this with Sihanouk but what was important was his relationship between the two countries which he was going to lead. There was just nothing we could do at

that point. It wasn't a case of more aid or less aid. He just simply had suspicions of what we were up to. I think it's because of the situation in Vietnam.

O'BRIEN: Well, thank you, Ambassador Sprouse, for a very good interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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