

Phillips Talbot Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 12/5/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Phillips Talbot

Date of Interview: December 5, 1964

Location: Washington, D.C.

Length: 28 pages

Phillips Talbot (1915-2010) served as the Assistant Secretary of the Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Bureau within the Department of State from 1961 to 1965. This interview focuses on Talbot's role in the State Department, John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s cultivation of relations with Near Eastern and South Asian countries, and the problems he encountered in these countries, among other issues.

Access Restrictions

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed January 8, 1991, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Talbot, Phillips, oral statement, on December 5, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of
Phillips Tallbot

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Phillips Tallbot, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of personal interviews conducted on December 5, 1964, July 27, 1965 and August 13, 1970 at Washington, DC and New York, NY and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be made available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the John F. Kennedy Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Phillips Tallbot
Donor

November 25, 1990
Date

[Signature]
Archivist of the United States

Jan 8, 1991
Date

Phillips Talbot—JFK #1
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s interests regarding Ceylon
3	JFK's reception of the parliamentary delegation from Ceylon
5	Ceylonese nationalization of American oil companies' facilities
6	The Hickenlooper Amendment and suspension of U.S. aid to Ceylon
9	Issue of population control in the Near East and South Asia
10	Criticism of JFK for negotiating with African Americans
13	JFK's interest in Afghanistan and its proximity to the Soviet Union
15	State visit of the King and Queen of Afghanistan
17	JFK's cultivation of the U.S. relationship with India
19	Uncertain relationship between U.S. and Pakistan
23	JFK's balance of relations with both Israel and Arab states
25	Relations between JFK and Gamal Abdel Nasser
26	Joseph Johnson's missions to the Middle East

Oral History Statement

with

PHILLIPS TALBOT

December 5, 1964
Washington, D.C.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TALBOT: I am Phillips Talbot, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, working with Miss [Elizabeth] Donahue in the Kennedy Oral History Project, dictating in my office in the State Department on December 5, 1964.

I should like to start with some comments on the President's interests and actions in connection with our relations with Ceylon as I recall them. It was evident from early in his administration that he was intrigued with the idea of a woman Prime Minister. Mrs. Bandaranaike, and he discussed her with both outgoing Ambassador [Bernard A.] Gufler and incoming Ambassador Frances Willis early in his term. The first substantive issue that I recall arising in our relations with Ceylon after President Kennedy took office had to do with the renewal of the Voice of America agreement. Negotiations starting in

[-1-]

1960 had dragged on for months, and there was a genuine fear in this government that Mrs. Bandaranaike's government, which strongly valued the symbolism of its non-aligned position, might well refuse to renew the VOA agreement on the ground that this would appear to align the government of Ceylon with the West in the Cold War situation. The Department of State with the endorsement of McGeorge Bundy's staff had proposed that President Kennedy write a personal letter to Mrs. Bandaranaike to establish direct communication and to encourage her to support the renewal of the VOA agreement. The President not only agreed with alacrity to a letter that went out on March 15, 1961, but he also discussed the possibility of a visit to this country by

Mrs. Bandaranaike. Ambassador Willis strongly favored this idea, and it was supported by the Department, though within weeks it became evident that so many other visitors from countries regarded as larger and, perhaps, more important were flocking into Washington in 1961 that an invitation to Mrs. Bandaranaike would be best deferred until later. It was particularly

[-2-]

interesting to all of us that when Ambassador Willis, on home leave two years later in 1963, called on the President, it was he rather than she who raised the question of whether a visit could not be arranged despite what by then had become intensely competing pressures on his time. I don't happen to know how far President Kennedy had personally involved himself in the selection of Ambassador Willis to go to Ceylon, but he was obviously titillated at the idea of having a woman ambassador appointed to a country with a woman Prime Minister.

On June 14, 1961, the President received a parliamentary delegation from Ceylon. This delegation of about six or eight members included members of parliament from several different parties. What had been scheduled as a ten or fifteen minute courtesy dragged on for nearly forty-five minutes to everyone's surprise, including the President's. Soon after the Ceylonese had arrived in his office on that warm day he had offered them drinks, and they had asked for Coca-Cola. At the President's request

[-3-]

I stepped out of the room to ask his secretary, Mrs. Lincoln, to round up about eight Cokes. For some reason they seemed not immediately available in the White House, and we waited for nearly a half an hour while the conversation ranged from subject to subject before the Cokes turned up. It was evident that the President made a tremendous impression on his visitors by his keen and searching questions about details of life and development programs in Ceylon. He had the visitors describing various agricultural programs, a large dam project, and other aspirations of the Ceylon government, and he conveyed to them, I thought, a genuine enthusiasm for measures that would lead to progress in Ceylon.

However, it became clear that he was particularly intrigued with one member of the delegation, N.M. Perera, who in 1964 was to become Finance Minister of Ceylon. His interest in Mr. Perera arose not only from the latter's clear and articulate views but because Mr. Perera was, and is, what must be one of the few practicing politicians in the world who are avowedly Trotskyite. The President questioned

[-4-]

Mr. Perera closely on the Trotskyist movement in Ceylon and on the Trotskyist approach to the problems of Ceylon. As we sat waiting for the Coca-Colas, I became gradually concerned that the President's intellectual curiosity would lead him to worry some of the other, and more conservative, members of the delegation by his particular attention to the Trotskyite. When the delegation left, the President gave the members the feeling, as he so often did with visitors, that he had thoroughly enjoyed his time with them (as I believe he did) and would be delighted to see them again at their desire.

The major setback in our relations with Ceylon during President Kennedy's tenure arose out of the decision of the government of Ceylon to nationalize substantial portions of the facilities owned by three western oil companies, including the two American companies Esso and Caltex. The Hickenlooper Amendment in 1962 had required that US aid be stopped in any country which nationalized American property without making arrangements for prompt and adequate

[-5-]

compensation. When the legislation took effect six months after passage, the Ceylonese had failed to meet the minimum standards. So far as I know, the President had not been involved personally in the decision to suspend aid to Ceylon on February 7, 1963; that was the automatic consequence of the legislation. When, however, the President became aware that the Ceylonese were not only unhappy by this action but felt that the United States government had been guilty of something approaching bad faith by cutting off aid after Mrs. Bandaranaike's government had inferred from certain comments made to her ministers that the provisions of the legislation would for some time be met by certain discussions then going on, the President got into the subject personally. When the new Ceylonese envoy, Ambassador [Merenna Franic de Silva] Jayaratne, presented his credentials to the President on April 8, 1963, he indicated the unhappiness of his government with the way in which the aid matter had been handled. (For details see State Department Memorandum to

[-6-]

McGeorge Bundy, dated April 11, 1963, on "Ceylon - Suspension of Assistance following Crucial Meeting on February 6".) The President told the Ambassador that he would investigate the circumstances, and instructed the State Department to give him the relevant information. Thereafter, the President at his own initiative pursued this subject actively. After receiving the aforementioned memo, he took the occasion of a call by Ambassador Willis on May 7, 1963 (see uncleared memorandum of conversation) to ask her judgement of the propriety of the United States government action. It was at this meeting that he stated specifically that Ambassador Willis could tell the Ceylonese authorities that United States' aid would be resumed when the compensation issue had been satisfactorily settled. The Ceylonese Ambassador, Mr. Jayaratne, called on the President on July 31, 1963, to raise a question of Ceylon's concern about the treatment of Buddhists in South Vietnam. After responding with soothing words on this subject, the President at his initiative again

[-7-]

raised the question of the oil compensation issue. (See memorandum of conversation, dated July 31, 1963.) Going ahead of his brief, the President made the question seem a matter for possible personal negotiation between him and the Ambassador. In asking for "a reasonable proposal" from the government of Ceylon, he promised a "reasonable response." As I recall, in this conversation the President also gave a clear indication that the question of satisfactory compensation for the properties nationalized by the government of Ceylon would not necessarily

be taken by the government of the United States to be settled at the level of compensation desired by the companies whose properties had been nationalized. I had the impression that he wanted to convey the idea that the Hickenlooper Amendment, which had not and has not been applied to any other country, was not interpreted by him as putting the US Government in the position of being merely a collection agency for private companies regardless of the level of their claims. The President was at pains to convey to the Ambassador the idea that he, the

[-8-]

President, was extremely anxious to find a way to get over this rough patch and back into good relations between the United States and Ceylon. Coming out of the meeting afterwards, the Ambassador made several comments suggesting that he had understood and warmly appreciated the President's approach.

In subsequent months on occasions when I saw or talked with the President on other subjects, he sometimes asked about progress on the Ceylon compensation issue and each time indicated his disappointment that we had been unable to resolve the matter. I have no reason to believe that he was more concerned with our relations with Ceylon than with our relations with other countries, but having once got in his mind the desirability of settling this nagging irritant in our relations, he did not forget or ignore it in the press of larger problems.

At the end of a conference on another subject one day, probably in early 1963, the President paused to talk about the problems of population pressures in India and some of the other countries of the Near East and

[-9-]

South Asia. I believe that Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith was the third person in the room at the time. The President, as I recall, commented that this was a problem that would be licked one day. He understood the position of the Church, by which he meant the Roman Catholic Church. However, he said, he thought it likely that the Church would change its position on birth control in the not distant future, possibly within this generation. Through its history the Church had often changed positions on major issues, he observed, and he saw no reason why it should not do so on this one as well.

One day during the 1962 congressional campaign I happened to be with the President when his attention was caught by a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* criticizing him, as I recall, for making some arrangement or deal with professional politicians, probably Negroes, in Manhattan. The President expressed his irritation with vigor, as he could. He said he didn't know what went on in the minds of

[-10-]

these WASPS — White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They seem to think the world should be made in their image. They didn't understand that a President and a party needed a solid political base to do the great things the New Frontier was attempting. The people who thought they understood his higher goals were not the people who gave him his political base, often enough. It wasn't when he drove through the suburbs of Westchester that he got the big crowds; in fact, he could

drive southward through Westchester getting only limited attention, and it was only when he crossed the New York City line and headed down into Harlem that he saw the real crowds that turned out and were essential if he were able to do the things that he really wanted to do.

Late one December afternoon in 1962 I went to the President's office to get his approval of an urgent paper. As he started to read it there was a tap on the French door from outside. Caroline and her nursemaid were there, and the President asked me to open the door so they could come in. They had

[-11-]

come from shopping, and Caroline was excitedly desirous of showing her father a toy they had purchased. This was far more important to the President than my paper, of course, and I began to wonder whether he would get back to the paper. The problem was solved after a bit by my sitting on the floor of the President's office with Caroline helping her to put a toy horse together while her father returned to his desk to take action on the paper.

[end first session]

Second Session

PHILLIPS TALBOT

July 27, 1965

TALBOT: This is Phillips Talbot, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, resuming comment on President Kennedy's interests in the Near Eastern and South Asian area. Today's date is July 27, 1965.

Afghanistan was one of the countries in which President Kennedy showed a particular interest. I gained the strong impression that he was much attracted by the combination of a rugged country landlocked up against the Soviet border with a population just beginning the modernization process. He had several talks with the Afghan ambassador in the course of which he asked wide-ranging and penetrating questions about Afghan society and about the attitudes of Afghans living just across the Oxus river from the Soviet Union. The closure of the Pakistan-Afghan border to traffic and trade in August 1961 irked the President

[-13-]

who made comments leading me to believe that he saw the action as a foolish outcome of a difficulty in which neither the proud Afghans nor the strong Pakistanis had been willing to carry negotiations to the point of finding a compromise. The President recognized the advantage that the border closure gave the Soviet Union and sponsored and encouraged all our efforts to help the Afghans find alternative Free World links to get necessary supplies and to give access to external markets. At the same time he made clear to some of us his own sense of regret that the Afghan hard-lining position on Pukhtunistan made it difficult for us to take a stronger position

with Pakistan. The President saw clearly that only some sort of compromise and agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan could prevent further substantial inroads into Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. At the same time he saw the limitations in the power of the United States to get either Afghanistan or Pakistan to change its line substantially, and he was careful not to get the United States overcommitted

[-14-]

in its efforts to influence either country on this issue.

It seemed to me that the President regarded the visit to Washington of the King and Queen in Afghanistan as one of the more interesting and charming of the rash of state visits. The King and he hit it off well and moved promptly into a serious discussion of Afghanistan's effort to maintain its independence in a non aligned posture. The King proved surprisingly frank in explaining his worries that near neighbors might attempt to extend their influence in his country beyond the capacity of Afghanistan to resist. The President offered the King the opportunity of direct and very private communication with him at any time the King might wish.

I had the feeling that the King had come here perhaps a little concerned that in its delicate balancing operation Afghanistan might recently have leaned a bit too far in the direction of the Soviet Union and, therefore, should repair and strengthen

[-15-]

its relations with the major power of the West. My impression was that the President understood this to be the hope that underlay the King's comments. In his understanding, friendly, and confident way the President greatly reassured the King, it seemed to me, that the United States did indeed have a genuine interest in Afghanistan, and that this country could be counted upon to be helpful if, and when, Afghanistan seriously should try to shift its political posture back a little more away from undue involvement with the Soviets.

President Kennedy had a thoroughly cheerful time with the Queen of Afghanistan, who turned out to possess a considerable sense of humor. According to the interpreter who was with them during the state dinner, the President got into a discussion of marriage and family customs in Afghanistan which led to his astonished realization that the Queen, a grandmother, must have married very young since she was about his age. His own children, of course, were still in their preschool years. When the President elicited the

[-16-]

information that the Queen had been married at fifteen, he caused her to roar with laughter by his comment that he wondered how a woman would feel if she had married a man like [Konrad] Adenauer at age fifteen and lived with him all through his long life.

India was another country that caught up the mind of the President. Enough is on the record of the time of Ambassador Galbraith, the Chinese attack and the other major involvements of the United States with India so that I will add only a few side comments. I did not have the feeling that the President was a "India-lover," in the sense of that kind of uncritical fascination which has been characteristic of some Americans. He saw its problems. He saw its

irritations. He saw its complexities and the very real difficulties standing in the way of intimacy between India and the United States. At the same time he had a lively sense of the drama and of the potential of a vast nation of people astir with new ideas in our generation and trying to pull itself up into the modern world. In a true sense, our India policy was President Kennedy's policy.

[-17-]

It was he who decided we could and should ignore some of the fulminations coming out of India at a time when Krishna Menon was not yet politically dead. He saw the American interest to be found in building a web of relationships with India despite the positions taken by Indian representatives in the United Nations and elsewhere that we sometimes found painful. This policy proved successful particularly when the badly shaken Indian leadership turned almost blindly to the United States at the moment that the Chinese attacked, and the President by a series of rapid moves gave India the reassurance which in my view was an essential ingredient in its handling its immediate domestic situation fairly successfully. I did not have the feeling that the President particularly enjoyed his meetings with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India during the latter's state visit here in 1961. The two men had substantially different styles, and Nehru's style was not of a sort calculated to stir or fully engage the President's interest. They

[-18-]

were observed as talking with animation at the luncheon at the Indian Embassy, however. Afterwards, those who had sat by them reported that the conversation had centered on the nature of God and the approaches to the deity of Hinduism and other religions.

President Kennedy initially hit it off much better with President [Mohammed] Ayub [Khan] of Pakistan. The Ayub state visit in the summer of 1961 set a Kennedy standard of elegance for such occasions, with the dinner served in tents on the lawn at Mount Vernon — an unrivalled occasion. I had found it odd that the Pakistan Embassy personnel had initially expressed their considerable disappointment that the state dinner was to be at Mount Vernon rather than the White House. They obviously place symbolic importance on the idea of a White House dinner. When the dinner proved such a spectacular success, they naturally changed their attitude toward it. The President seemed to regard President Ayub as something of a challenge. A big, vigorous frank military man, Ayub also had well-developed

[-19-]

political antennae. The problem was that Ayub kept endorsing American efforts in world affairs and reaffirming the fidelity of Pakistan to the Western alliance system, while he also protested against American policies that he regarded as injurious to the interests of Pakistan. It seemed impossible to get into a discussion with Ayub without its turning into a discussion of India. I had the impression that the President clearly wanted to maintain a good and effective relationship with Pakistan, but at the same time wanted Ayub to understand that he was not prepared to pay the price of defecting American relations with India in order to stay on good terms with Pakistan. Both in Washington and later during a rainy day meeting at Hammersmith Farm, the President and Mrs. Kennedy gave every sign of finding Ayub a pleasing and engaging guest. At the same

time both Ayub visits left an uncertain taste in the mouth — and my impression is the President felt this, as well as some of the rest of us — because much of the talk seemed to have

[-20-]

gone around familiar old circles without issues being resolved.

From the time he took office the President was aware of a drumbeat of Pakistan argument, advanced in Washington mostly by the Pakistan Ambassador Aziz Ahmed, that the United States had become so enamoured with nonalignment that it no longer was distinguishing between allies and neutrals. What advantage, therefore, the argument ran, was there for a country like Pakistan to remain in alliance with the West at some cost to itself? This Pakistani argument never noted the fact the US aid to Pakistan was about double the intensity on a per capita basis of US aid to India. After the Chinese attack on India and the American decision to assist India to defend itself, the Pakistani expression of irritation and resentment about United States policy grew more vociferous. The President repeatedly turned to the question of how to deal with this mood in Pakistan, but despite visits by such eminent Americans as Averall Harriman, George Ball, and General Maxwell Taylor it continued.

[-21-]

Much of the President's preoccupation with the subcontinent focused on the question of how to maintain the advances being achieved in American relations with India without at the same time suffering substantial erosion in our relations with Pakistan. In giving the Pakistanis repeated assurances of our care to avoid actions in India which would damage Pakistan's interests, he hoped to ease the tensions. His lack of success found voice in the comment several of us heard him make on more than one occasion that American assistance to the subcontinent was seriously dissipated because of the quarrels between India and Pakistan. The President never went so far as to order a substantial cut in aid to India and Pakistan; he saw the strategic significance of the subcontinent as too great to be risked, and he felt the quarrels to be so bone-deep that threats to change the levels of US aid would be unlikely to help erase them. Nonetheless, as he faced the serious struggles in Congress over the aid bill each year, he more than once vented

[-22-]

his irritation at the corrosive effects of the quarrels between India and Pakistan.

The complex of Arab-Israel issues also absorbed a good deal of the President's time and energy. In the Senate and in his campaign speeches in 1960 he had made a number of bold statements about seeking peace in the Near East. As President he was acutely aware of the knife-edge balances required to be maintained in our relations with Israel and the Arab countries if the overall American influence was to be constructive rather than exacerbating to the shrill tensions in the area. As a consummate politician he understood the importance in our domestic politics, and to the Democratic party, of that body of Americans roughly categorized as friends of Israel. These political considerations were constantly put to him, as to every American President since at least Harry Truman, by members of Congress, civic leaders, and some of his aides on the

White House staff. In particular, Myer Feldman, the deputy counsel to the President, felt himself charged with this task. The

[-23-]

President was aware that the Israeli Embassy recognized Feldman's special position and sometimes used him as a conduit to the President. On occasion the President would josh Feldman about being an Israeli emissary, and once he sent Feldman to Israel on a personal mission. I have no doubt that the President thought the State Department was weighted in the other direction. On one occasion, when I was arguing a course of action that seemed to me needed in the protection of our relations with several of the Arab states but which admittedly would cause pain to Israel, I commented on the hard nature of the sorts of decisions that involve both foreign policy and domestic political considerations. I urged the President on this occasion to determine that the foreign policy aspect should prevail. "The trouble with you, Phil," he responded, "is that you've never had to collect votes to get yourself elected to anything."

The President was deeply sensible at the same time to the complexities but essentially of maintaining American relations with the Arab states. He

[-24-]

asked no questions about whether we should maintain our transit rights, oil revenues with their billion dollar contribution to the balance of payments, and political connections with the troubled and criss-crossing Arab nationalist movements but rather how we could do this. It seemed to me he was initially hesitant about meeting Crown Prince Faisal in Washington, partly because there had been some troubling experiences during an earlier visit of King Saud, and partly because years earlier Prince Faisal himself had had an unpleasant experience while visiting in New York. When Faisal came, however, the working lunch between the two of them, with a few aides present on either side, went very well indeed.

Of the Arabs, President Kennedy obviously saw the greatest challenge in the problem of developing a relationship with [Gamal Abdel] Nasser. He had probably concluded even before becoming President that this was important. Once in office he set about to explore how it might be accomplished. The first step was to get into communication. Chester Bowles

[-25-]

and other Americans went to Cairo for long talks with Nasser. Then, rather against the advice of some of the old pros in the Department of State, President Kennedy undertook a letter writing program with Nasser and with other Arab leaders that became far more extensive than had been the case in earlier administrations. Although the President never decided to invite Nasser to Washington, I had the impression that he was weighing this possibility in 1961 and 1962. At a minimum, he encouraged those who thought that might be a useful step.

The President also endorsed a major effort to see whether some arrangement could be developed to dissolve the Palestine refugee question. This eventuated in the Joseph Johnson mission, an account of which should certainly be in the records of those days. The President

strongly wanted success in that effort, though in the end he did not feel it possible to commit the full weight of United States' influence to changing the Israeli position

[-26-]

and to some extent pulling the Arabs along.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-27-]