

**U. Alexis Johnson Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 6/18/64, 11/07/64**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** U. Alexis Johnson

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**Biographical Note**

Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. In this interview, U. Alexis Johnson discusses working with John F. Kennedy [JFK] during the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Laos Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, in addition to his personal experience with JFK's conduct in official meetings, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

U. Alexis Johnson

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U. Alexis Johnson – JFK #1

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B. This is tape 1 of an interview with the Honorable U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, by William Brubeck, Senior Staff Member, National Security Council, the White House, at the time most of these events took place until July of 1963 Deputy Executive Secretary and then Executive Secretary of the State Department, working in close association with Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson had served in Korea and Japan and China, Manchuria and the Philippines - in the Far East over a long period of time. He started in 1935 in the Foreign Service. His last post before coming back to Washington was an Ambassador to Thailand and U.S. Representative on the SEATO Council. He came back to Washington in the Kennedy Administration as Deputy Under Secretary of State, arriving on April 16, 1961, and reported for duty on April 17, in the middle of the Bay of Pigs crisis. During his subsequent career, for the last two and a half years in the Department during the Kennedy Administration, he has been responsible for politico-military affairs in the State Department, coordination of intelligence matters, and has been a general deputy to the Secretary on a wide range of matters, particularly Far East problems.

Let me start this, Alex, if I may, by asking you what your first contact in any form with John F. Kennedy was.

J. I am sorry, Bill - I can't remember the exact day. However, I remember within two or three days of my arrival back

here being called out of a meeting by my secretary to say that the President was on the phone, and the President asked me something about the situation in the Dominican Republic. It was somewhat deteriorating at that time but I had not yet been read into it and needless to say was very surprised by such a query. However, I understood later that it was not an unusual one and I feel that this was the way of the President getting new appointees in particular to see that they were on their toes.

B. What did you tell him? That you didn't know anything about it?

J. I told him that I didn't know anything about it but that I would find out as quickly as I could and call him back, which I did. He seemed to be satisfied with the report that I gave him.

B. I gather that after that telephone call - what was your next contact with him?

J. The first time I saw him face to face was at an NSC meeting on Saturday, April 22, with respect to Cuba.

B. Were you introduced to him there?

J. Yes, I was just introduced but we were a large number of people in the NSC at the time and he called the whole NSC together, and obviously the Bay of Pigs - the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs - was very, very much on his mind, and the meeting had been called primarily to review in general some of the circumstances with respect to it, and particularly the point he was making was that he accepted responsibility for what

had happened. He expected everybody to be in it together with him and he was urging people not to discuss it outside and start any back-biting within the Administration.

B. Was he eloquent?

J. He was exceedingly eloquent and exceedingly impressive and it was a very, very impressive meeting for me to meet him at the time of such a crisis.

In that connection, Bill, a little bit of history as of that time with respect to his relations with Chet Bowles. I was nominally Chet Bowles' deputy at that time and Chet Bowles was Acting Secretary. I cannot recall exactly where the Secretary was but I recall that the Secretary was not present in the Department. Although I had never known Chet Bowles previously and I was just establishing a relationship with him, I remember during the course of that week Chet Bowles showed me on what he termed a very confidential and personal basis a memorandum that he had written opposing the Bay of Pigs. It's my impression and, from subsequent events and publicity, became my impression that he had shown this to a very considerable number of people until it finally reached the press that he had opposed the Bay of Pigs. This was quite contrary to what the President had been seeking to accomplish in his NSC meeting with the senior members of the Administration and I have no doubt that this came to the attention of the President and I think ultimately affected all of his subsequent relations with Chet Bowles.

My next contact with the President was on Laos. Very shortly after I came back, or during the period even that I was coming back, the situation on Laos was deteriorating quite rapidly. The Pathet Lao, together with Viet-Minh support and the Soviet airlift into the Plaine des Jarres, were pressing the conservative forces of Phoumi very hard and it appeared that, unless action was taken very quickly, the Pathet Lao would well overrun all of Laos. My records indicate that my first meeting at the White House with the President on Laos was on April 26. The Secretary, as I recall it, was away at the CENTO meeting in Ankara at that time and Chet Bowles was in charge of the Department. I can well recall that we had a long meeting at which Arleigh Burke - Admiral Burke - acted as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

B. Was this a meeting with the President?

J. This was a meeting with the President. Arleigh Burke laid out the various alternatives on the military side. Chet Bowles took a very negative attitude towards any intervention in Laos. My own personal inclinations were very much along the lines that, while I was reluctant to intervene in Laos, I felt that the best chance we had of stopping the Communists was making clear our determination to use force if necessary, and that, once we had that determination, it would probably not be necessary to use force. As a member of the SEATO Council I had been very familiar with the military plans calling for



intervention in Laos and I felt I was fairly familiar with the strengths and the weaknesses of those.

B. What kind of meeting was this? Was this NSC or just a decision-making meeting, or a briefing meeting?

J. This meeting on Wednesday, April 26, as I recall it, was primarily a briefing meeting. It was in the Cabinet Room. I cannot remember the size of the group but I remember that, as I recall it, the Secretary of Defense, or at least people from the Secretary of Defense's office were there. Arleigh Burke was representing the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It is my recollection that General Lemnitzer, who was then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was out in Southeast Asia, and the Secretary was at the CENTO meeting in Ankara.

B. Was the President calling on a series of people? Or how did you happen to be contacted?

J. I can't recall quite the circumstances leading up to the meeting except that the meeting had been called. The President desired to be briefed on the situation and I well recall that Admiral Burke at that time laid out what was then known as SEATO Plan 5, which called for a limited intervention in the main cities of the Mekong Valley. The matter got presented in such a way that the President - let me put it this way - I recall that the briefing - the military part of the briefing - pointed out that several thousand Americans would be landed at these various points in Laos. As I recall it, 2

or 3 thousand in Vientiane, and then when the President asked as to whether or not we would be able to protect them on the airfield in Vientiane, it is my recollection that the replies were generally to the effect that we could not without striking at the Chinese Communist air bases in Communist China and the President thus got a picture (without using too much hyperbole) of this small band of Americans beleaguered on the airfield in Vientiane with the United States facing the choice as to whether or not we would go to nuclear war with China to rescue them. This impression of the military problem in Laos remained with him throughout the rest of his Administration. Although I felt at the time that this was a false impression, I also felt that it really was not the intention of the Joint Chiefs - the military - to give such an impression. Nevertheless, this became very clearly fastened in the President's mind and he was naturally very, very concerned from then on about the possibility of any military intervention in Laos.

B. Southeast Asia had a very nuclear flavor to him.

J. It had a very nuclear flavor to him and, of course, after the Bay of Pigs experience, he was naturally very concerned about undertaking another what you might call adventure without being sure of what the consequences might be.

B. You had a series of meetings with him, I take it, on Laos over a period of several weeks during a very concentrated crisis, certainly up to the Geneva - the beginning of the Geneva Conference?

J. Yes, I did. The really crucial meeting and turning point on Laos came on Thursday, April 27. As I recall it, that was a formal NSC meeting with which he had with a somewhat larger group than the NSC. Admiral Burke presented the military picture. Chester Bowles, who was Acting Secretary at the time, presented, I would say, a negative view with respect to any intervention in Southeast Asia of any kind on the military side. I was invited by the President and also by Chester Bowles to give my own views, which I did. During the course of the meeting the President indicated his desire to meet with the Congressional leadership and a very considerable number of Congressmen from both parties and both Houses, representing most of the Committees and most of the shades of opinion, were ushered into the room while we were still more or less in the process of the NSC meeting.

B. He just added them to the NSC in the course of the meeting?

J. Yes.

B. On his own judgment?

J. On his own judgment. I would say that the NSC meeting had terminated in the formal sense but they blended right into it. At that time General Clifton and I were both present in the room. From force of habit I started making some notes on what was going on in the meeting and, from my notes and the notes General Clifton made, we later on made up a brief record

of that meeting. I would call that date the turning point. At the request of the President, Admiral Burke presented again the picture of the consequences of intervention, presenting the possible necessity of this leading to a war with Communist China in which we might have to use nuclear weapons. Chester Bowles presented his views on it and then, to my intense surprise, without my being really prepared and having ordered my thoughts for such a discussion, the President turned to me and asked me to express my views. This offended by bureaucratic sense somewhat and I felt that Chester Bowles, as Acting Secretary, was speaking for the Department and it would not be proper for me to speak to the contrary but, nevertheless, having been invited by the President to do so, I spoke as forcefully as I could as to what I saw the issues and the consequences were. I was encouraged somewhat to speak because I knew of Dean Rusk's very strong views on the subject and knew that Dean Rusk also felt that our best chance of avoiding war in Southeast Asia was to be willing to use force.

B. Had you had a cable exchange with the Secretary at that point?

J. At that point we had not. However, the Secretary had come out to Bangkok while I was still there for the SEATO meeting and we had long discussions of the subject at that time so I had what I thought was a good feel of his own views. However during the course of the meeting with Congressional leaders, a telegram from the Secretary came in from Ankara and this was

read to the meeting. The Congressional leaders, after hearing the presentation, to a man, both on the conservative and the liberal sides, the Republican and the Democrats, all of them opposed intervention, and that was the date on which really the die was cast.

B. What you are saying about the Joint Chiefs really is that they thought they had to make a very strong case. They didn't want to go in with partial measures and their argument was that if you went in you had to go in prepared to go all the way and the end result of this, whether it was due to that or not, you are saying that in any event perhaps partly due to how strongly they presented that case, the judgment went the other way, that this was such a big investment in terms of the military judgment on it that everybody was diffident about going into it.

J. Was diffident and really frightened off about going in. I know that Admiral Felt urged very strongly that we should go in on a limited basis to protect the Mekong Valley area. Nobody was urging that we go in to try to take over all of Laos. The issue was simply whether you could best protect Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia by stopping the Communists where they were and holding the Mekong River Valley part of Laos.

B. What was the President's reaction to all of this?  
Just listening?

J. He was primarily listening. He did not commit himself. However, the questions that he would ask and his returning to this question of our ability to defend the airfields - what the position would be of our troops on the airfield at Vientiane and the other places along the river - all indicated that he was very, very deeply disturbed at exposing a body of Americans to a situation in which he might have to take very extreme measures to protect them.

B. I broke in on you in the middle of that meeting, so go ahead.

J. As I said, the result of the meeting was that there was strong, unanimous and understandable, I would say, in view of the presentation that was made, resistance by the Congressional leaders to any intervention. Although from then on we went through various maneuvers, we went through various feints, I would call them, of a military kind, and of a political kind, it was quite clear in the minds of all of us that, whatever happened, we were not going to militarily intervene. And from that followed inevitably the decision that we would have Phoumi, the conservative Lao leader, seek a ceasefire, and very heavy pressure was put on him to seek a ceasefire from the Pathet Lao and to go to a Geneva conference - a 14-nation Geneva Conference on Laos - which had been proposed by Prince Sihanouk.

B. Did the President articulate a clear conclusion of some kind at the end of the meeting?

J. No, he did not.

B. You came away from that meeting with a sense of a fairly momentous policy decision and course of action.

J. Yes.

B. Where did you get it from as far as he was concerned?

J. Well, this is difficult to explain. You simply arrived at an impression and a feeling of the meeting from his reactions, from the Congressional leaders' reactions, and I can't recall what the specific focus of operational conclusion was at the time.

B. Was that your experience with him generally, that he didn't tend to try to make definitive statements at the end of meetings?

J. Yes, I very much had the experience that he did not try to sum up meetings. He did not try to himself set forth what I would call clear and succinct statements of decisions. This was usually left to McGeorge Bundy to sum up in writing the consensus of a meeting and seek his approval for it. My experience with President Kennedy was that he was reluctant to deal with anything except the immediate specific issue that required decision at the time. He was not what I would call a philosophical or a subjective turn of mind. He liked to deal in hard realities. He liked to decide only the things that had to be decided and if he had a weakness I would say that it was his tendency to decide in the light of the immediate circumstances at the time without trying to look too far ahead,

letting the future somewhat take care of itself. I don't mean that he ignored the future, but he was not a man to whom you could present a plan, say a program, extending six, eight, ten months down the road and expect anything in the way of a reaction from him. He would decide what had to be decided today today.

B. After that momentous Thursday NSC which in effect set us on the track to the Geneva Conference, you met about every other day for a period of several weeks still on Laos. What were you doing in all of those meetings?

J. This was the strategy leading up to the Geneva Conference, the tactics to be used at the conference, and the instructions to our delegation at the conference and all of the details that went into it, but from that Thursday, April 27, on we were moving towards the conference.

B. The President was taking a lot of his time to meet in quite a bulky meeting of the NSC on the detailed planning for the Geneva Conference, not just approving papers that come to him but apparently holding meetings on the plans, preparations, the problem of getting a cease-fire in Laos and what the latest word from the Russians was, the latest negotiations between the British and Russians on a cease-fire. Is that right?

J. That is correct. The President liked to have discussion around him. The President liked to hear a large



number of views and many of these meetings were what I would call seminars, more, rather than meetings. People were not fully prepared. Subordinate staff members both from the White House and other Departments would discuss matters in a free-wheeling, thinking-aloud type of way, and I know this always bothered Dean Rusk a bit. Dean felt that he and the Secretary of Defense and other members of the Cabinet had their share of responsibility for advising the President, they had their responsibility for assuring that their advice was fully staffed, and I know that Dean felt a great deal of impatience in engaging in what he felt on the same level with a lot of other ideas about a lot of other people who didn't have responsibilities for what they were advising. However, the President always enjoyed this and it was one of the difficulties of doing business. He would often call for a meeting long before people had a chance to sort out their ideas. Going back to my own experience, of course, as a long-time bureaucrat, I suppose you might call me, I liked to see things done in an orderly way, but the President wanted to get at things and get into things before they had become too orderly, before opinions had become too departmentalized. This was both a strength and a weakness, of course.

B. In a way, he wanted to participate in the staff work?

J. He wanted to participate in the staff work.

B. Do you think he appreciated or realized, and if so how do you think he felt about the possible feelings of his

senior responsible people like the Secretary of State, and Defense, at having to engage in a sort of debate and seminar with a lot of people who didn't have responsibilities and who were talking off the cuff? Did he indicate any feeling about this?

J. I really don't think he had any sense about it - I don't think he had much appreciation really at that period at least - much appreciation of what the great executive departments of the government - the whole executive machinery, you might say, how it was organized, how it was operated, how it operated, and how he could best make use of the great executive department of the government. Of course, all of us well recognize - I am not saying any of this in any sense of a complaint - the President is the boss and that each and every President is going to run things and operate things in the way that is most comfortable for him, and this is the way it should be, and we all need to accommodate ourselves to it. But it did require accommodation on the part of the departments. I don't think, looking back on it, we served him as well as we possibly could have if we had been able to proceed with things in a somewhat orderly manner - I am not talking about taking a lot of time - but rather doing things in a more orderly manner. For example, if the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense were given an opportunity to confer with each other and arrive at a consensus from which they could advise the

President, I think he could expect this to be fairly sound advice, but it often happened that we went into the meetings with no advance preparation whatsoever at the staff level without even knowing one another's views.

B. It wasted a lot of his time in a way, didn't it?

J. It seemed to me that it wasted a lot of his time - I don't know whether you call it wasted - I suppose there was a certain amount of education involved in it. It got him into problems in depth instead of presenting him with a ready-prepared solution. I suppose some of this grew out of his experience with the Bay of Pigs. I was not here at the time of the preparation for it and I am not familiar at all with that, but I suppose he had a little feeling that he had listened to advice that was perhaps a little too pat at the time, without going into it himself.

B. He hadn't gone behind the staff work?

J. He hadn't gone behind the staff work and was understandably somewhat suspicious, if I can use that word.

B. What you are saying is that, rather than the Bay of Pigs leading him to feel he wanted a more orderly and deliberate approach to things, it led him to feel that he had been maybe trapped by getting too canned and predigested a product and he wanted far more into the raw material decision-making.

J. I suppose that may be the case - not being too familiar with exactly how the Bay of Pigs was handled - I have somewhat the impression that may be the case.

B. You said something - I have forgotten what it was - that suggested that you felt that the style changed somewhat over the next year - I don't want to anticipate - but do you think this was an early '61 style - do you feel that there was a change in it?

J. Not a very great change. This generally remained his mode of operation. He always liked to get in touch with whatever he thought was the source of operation - the desk officer, the assistant secretary. He always liked to go to the source. He liked to hear discussion, and he was not an orderly administrator in that sense. Let me say in that regard at this point that I think McGeorge Bundy performed a very, very useful and essential function in translating his wishes and his desires into action in the Executive Departments. McGeorge Bundy had an appreciation of the Executive Departments, how they operated, how to get them to operate, and I think he performed a very useful function in acting as a bridge between the Departments and President Kennedy.

B. Alex, I notice, getting back to the chronology of this, a series of NSC meetings from April 26 to about May 5th, and then there was a meeting apparently which was not an NSC on Saturday afternoon, May 6th, you were in with the President and McGeorge Bundy. Do you remember anything in particular about that meeting, that it was distinguishable from NSC meetings?

J. No, I am not able to recall that. There were so many meetings - I was over at the White House so often. I got so deeply involved in this Laos affair that I can't remember that specific meeting, although I do recall that at times I would meet with him alone or with McGeorge Bundy.

B. Mostly briefing?

J. Mostly briefing, bringing him up to date, or...

B. Did he call you a lot?

J. No, I don't recall too much in the way of telephone calls - an occasional telephone call - it was usually a matter for decision. I would usually make contact first with McGeorge Bundy and then occasionally the two of us would go up to see the President. I imagine it was something of this kind.

B. He was always following the trail of decisions very closely and making a lot of them himself?

J. Very, very much so, and that continued on during the time of the Geneva meeting. You will recall that Averell Harriman was designated our representative at the Geneva Conference and, as I recall it, began about the middle of May - May 12 - Dean Rusk went to the opening of the conference and then Averell carried on, and I can recall during the course of the conference a very considerable number of issues arising on exactly what we were going to ask for, exactly what we would agree to. I can particularly remember an issue that

arose with respect to the freedom of the ICC to operate in Laos. The issue was whether or not the Government of Laos had within the agreement itself already given entire consent to the ICC operating any place it desired by majority rule, or whether the agreement of the government - and this meant the agreement of all three factions - had to be sought in each specific case. I can remember this issue having arisen and some of us in the Department, myself as I recall taking the lead, expressing great concern over the matter and feeling that we should take a somewhat stronger stand on it than our delegation was in Geneva. We went over to discuss this with the President late one afternoon, I can recall, and he asked me to come back early the next morning so that he could talk directly to Governor Harriman on the telephone and -

B. Harriman was in Geneva?

J. Harriman was in Geneva, yes, and I participated in the three-way conversation with Harriman on the subject during the course of which the President agreed to the recommendations Harriman was making in this regard. If I may indulge in a little hindsight, I believe some of the difficulties we are in today in Laos go back to that decision. However, the question was whether, if we held out for something more, we were going to be able to get it in the Geneva agreement, and it was uppermost in the President's mind at that time that we should. I think the President also felt that, following his

conversations with Khrushchev in Vienna in June, he had an understanding on the subject of Laos with Khrushchev and that perhaps it was not necessary to try to spell things out in too great detail, but to rely on the Soviets to carry out the agreement in relatively good faith.

B. That was after the decision we are talking about?

J. No, I think the Khrushchev meeting was before this. I can't remember exactly when the incidents I am speaking of took place except that it was fairly late along in the Geneva meetings and towards the end of the Geneva meetings.

B. Why do you think he made that decision - because he had again the Chiefs' nuclear alternative breathing down his neck and his need for a conference, or just taking the judgment of a guy on the spot?

J. I think it was a combination of things. I think that he did have the nuclear question breathing down his neck, as you phrased it. He did have great respect for Governor Harriman's judgment and properly so, and he wanted the agreement. He was again not inclined, I think, to look too far ahead. As of that time the agreement seemed a good thing, and, given all the circumstances, I agreed it was a good thing.

B. Do you have any sense, looking back over those Laos meetings, do you have the feeling that he was being a strong chairman of the board, or an observer, a listener? How would you describe his role in that whole process. You said he didn't articulate his decisions at the end but what about the

meetings themselves, what kind of a role was he playing?

J. I would - everybody in the room at all times, and always in his presence, were always very conscious of the fact that he was the President and this just wasn't the title but the whole way in which he bore himself. I would not call him a strong chairman of the board type as far as running a meeting is concerned - the meetings tended to become, at least for my taste, somewhat too confused and I always had a feeling I wished that he would use a little stronger hand in running the meetings, but this of course was contrary to his own evident desire to hear everybody discuss things out.

B. Who do you think, during this whole Lao series of meetings, who was he listening to, who was affecting and influencing him most? He obviously took very seriously the military judgment of the Chiefs about the price of going into Southeast Asia.

J. It is hard to divine people's motives, of course. I have a little the feeling that, very understandably and instinctively, he did not want to become militarily involved in Southeast Asia. It was far removed from the United States, he was sensitive to the fact that he had not been able to deal with Cuba, just ninety miles off our shores. I think he was sensitive to the domestic political aspects of this. He was always a politician in a very big sense of the term, with a very, very keen sense of political realities in this country and, to a degree, I think he may have tended at least subconsciously to have seized upon the Chiefs; I think, very inept presentation of the military situation to rationalize and justify his own instinct that he didn't want to get involved.

B. Any relations with any other people, or the effect of any other



people particularly notable during that period?

J. No, I am not able to recall particularly. He listened at that time to Bob McNamara. McNamara incidentally himself was very adverse to going in. He listened considerably to him. But I would be hard-put to selecting one individual that I thought exercised a dominant influence.

B. Who of the second-level staff people were active in the meetings did he seem to be interested in hearing? Was Schlesinger sitting in on these?

J. Yes, Schlesinger was sitting in, but, let me recall, Sorenson, Schlesinger - who was dealing with Far Eastern affairs at that time on the White House staff - it was before Mike Forrestal came in? I think Bob Komer was active, as I recall it.

I think that covers generally the flavor of the Lao affair.

B. That went on through May and June also - I think we were continuing to meet on Laos. During the summer of 1961 I cannot recall much in the way of other direct personal contacts on other subjects on my part. I'm trying to recall when General Taylor was first brought into the - this was .... during the summer of 1961, as I recall it, General Taylor was appointed as military representative of the President at the White House in June of 1961 and I immediately was assigned by the Department, as far as Departmental affairs were concerned, to work with him. One of the major tasks he was given by the President following his carrying out of an investigation of the Bay of Pigs affair was looking into our organization and capabilities for what the President fastened on as counterinsurgency. This was natural and understandable, considering the amount we had invested in Laos and our inability to do better than we were doing there, the deteriorating situation in Viet-Nam, South Viet-Nam, at the time, other situations around the

world, I think the President was very right in asking whether we were doing the right things in the right way. He undoubtedly had heard the stories that in South Viet-Nam, for example, we had trained a conventional army for a conventional type of attack in the north and it was utterly unable to cope with the guerrilla situation in the south, that the AID Administration was more interested in long-term development than in doing something to contribute to meeting the situation there, and all these stories and reports that had led him to ask General Taylor to go into this situation and I did so, along with General Taylor on one side. Bobby Kennedy participated very actively in all this and it was never clear in my mind as to how much the impetus of this came from the President himself and how much it came from Bobby. Throughout this whole period and this whole business of counterinsurgency, psychological warfare that he also asked General Taylor to look into, I myself did not have any direct personal contact with the President on it. My relationship to it at the time was primarily through General Taylor and the President's reflection through General Taylor. However, this all resulted, I think, while disorganized somewhat, in much useful work that is going to have permanent value to the U.S. Government. The group of us, that is, Fowler Hamilton, the AID Administrator, Bobby Kennedy, John McCone, General Lemnitzer, at that time, Ros Gilpatric representing Defense, Ed Murrow of USIA, myself representing State, finally culminated in the issuance of a NSAM in January 1962 setting up what became known as the Special Group (Counterinsurgency). I have never been too fond of the term counterinsurgency. However, this was very firmly fastened in the President's mind as what he wanted to have done.

B. The title is his?

J. I know it was his, because I know that many of us commented on it at times, and General Taylor indicated very much that this was the President's title and the title was not too important. The establishment of the Special Group led to a very much greater emphasis in the military services on training for engaging in guerrilla warfare and at the Departmental level here in Washington, led to much better coordination of effort. Out of this interest of the President in this, we set up, by agreement between the Departments, what was known as the Senior Seminar in the Department which is now known as the National Seminar on Internal Defense in which we undertook to indoctrinate and train senior officials senior officials in the Government going to the field - Ambassadors, MAG chiefs, AID chiefs, USIA chiefs, and so on, trying to inculcate in them from the very beginning what was known as the Country Team concept - the Country Team approach to problems. I think this has turned out to be a very useful and very permanent feature of the organization of the Government. The Special Group also turned out to be a very useful forum in which to reach decisions in this field. There was a considerable amount of, shall I say, conceptional difference over what the Special Group was to be. I am not clear that the President ever entered into it very directly, but among some, and particularly in the Pentagon, there was the desire to turn this into an operating group of its own independent of the Departments. I think this was also somewhat Bobby's idea. General Taylor and I, perhaps being longer-term bureaucrats in Washington, felt that this could only be effective insofar as it represented the Departments and permeated down into the Departments. Although the conceptional difference was never fully resolved, in fact, the group has operated as representatives of the Departments rather than having a separate corporative identity of its own.

B. What do you think the President's real interest in this operation was - dissatisfaction with the speed with which things were done and the quality of follow-up?

J. Yes, and his dissatisfaction with what was being done. And I think he had a right to be dissatisfied with what was being done; considering what we had invested in some of these areas, we didn't seem to be getting the return out of it that we should and I think he properly felt that somehow or other the Departments back here simply were not pulling together and drawing together, as I like to phrase it, all going down the same road.

B. Did you have the feeling that Taylor was working very closely as his agent?

J. Yes, I think so. General Taylor was in very direct personal contact throughout much of this with the President and I know General Taylor also had his problems with what the President's real desires were. This was again the tendency of the President not to express himself too deliberately and deliberately not to express himself too clearly, but to give general guidelines of action. He obviously had a great deal of respect for General Taylor and he gave General Taylor a number of unrelated jobs, really. Within this same group, General Taylor was given the job of looking into the whole question of what is sometimes known as psychological warfare, and there was a great deal of discussion as to whether or not there should be a psychological warfare coordinator in the White House, or whether there should be an Under Secretary of State for Psychological Warfare. All kinds of schemes were looked at.

B. This is Tape 2, U. Alexis Johnson. At the end of Tape 1, he had been talking about General Taylor's role in psychological warfare. He is going to start that over at this point.

J. As I recall it, during this period General Taylor was asked (I am not sure how much was Bobby and how much was from the President) to go into this whole question of psychological warfare. I cannot remember the precise incident that gave rise to it but I do recall that there were some incidents in which a number of American embassies around the world were stoned and demonstrations were held, and there was a considerable amount of frustration - I infer, on the part of the President - I know it certainly was on the part of Bobby, as to why, when anything happened and the United States did anything, the Communists were able to mobilize people around the world to protest this and to carry out demonstrations against us, whereas we seemed to be unable to do anything similar to them or, similarly, to mobilize opinion in our favor. This was, I think, very heavily simply a frustration. Nevertheless, I think it was useful that we were asked to go into it. Although General Taylor himself had not had much experience with it, we had a large number of inter-departmental consultations and meetings on it. I do recall that we brought down a number of men from New York who were prominent in the information field - NBC, CBS, and so on - to consult with us on the problem and to make recommendations. Various formulae were produced, one for a psychological warfare specialist in the White House to coordinate all the Government Departments. Another was for an Under Secretary of State charged with psychological warfare, and so on. Finally, the recommendation was made that the State Department set up a coordinator for this subject and we asked Doug Cater

to come in and he spent a month with us - with me - in the Department to look over our organization there. We had hoped to have him take the position there. In the absence of anybody else really to take this on, I took it on as a function in the Department at the time, the concept being that we should do better than we were doing with youth - the concept being that, for example, we should make better use of the Labor Department in mobilizing labor organizations in the United States to work with their opposite numbers abroad, mobilizing HEW to get doctors - to do better with doctors abroad - and so on. We had a number of meetings on this subject which I tried to coordinate. It was a very difficult thing and uncoordinatable really by its very nature. Luke Battle was assigned to CU in the Department. He took over the youth activities, and I think a very great deal of very useful work has been done throughout the Government, particularly in the youth field. When Averell Harriman came into the Department as Under Secretary for Political Affairs I very happily transferred this function to him and Bill Jordan has been working as a staff assistant to Averell in carrying this out. Of course the difficulty with the whole thing, and what we had to go through as an educative process, I think, was to demonstrate that you really cannot divorce psychological warfare from policy. Our policies are what psychological warfare, insofar as we are effective in it, are derived from and it cannot be handled as a separate compartment of government. However, you will recall the Eisenhower Administration went through much the same phase of trying to deal with psychological warfare as something separable.

B. C. D. Jackson . . . .

J. Yes, as a matter of fact we had C. D. down here to discuss this with us. He strongly urged against trying to repeat the Eisenhower experiment

in which he came in in that function in the White House.

B. In this whole area, you were very much conscious of, I take it, the President's interest but it always appeared via Bobby and General Taylor.

J. It appeared, as far as I was concerned, via Bobby and General Taylor so I cannot speak of direct personal contact with him.

B. Well, after the Laos crisis transferred to Geneva and began to cool off, your contacts with him, I take it, were limited but on a wide range of topics.

J. Yes, a large number of NSC meetings on various subjects and in which I was usually going as number 2 or 3 - along with the Secretary - or the Acting Secretary at the time.

B. Do you recall anything in particular from those meetings about the President himself that would be of interest?

J. No, I don't.

B. Did he ever call on you himself?

J. Yes.

B. Were you in a relationship where he would call on you?

J. Yes, we were - he always called me by first name - he would usually not only ask for the views of the Secretary but he would usually ask for views of the other members of the other Departments, including myself, who were around the table.

B. Did he make any problems for you?

J. Usually not, no. If I had any differences I did not exhibit them at the time.

B. But he had no sense of the problems involved in this kind of technique, did he?

J. No, I don't think he did, and whereas it offended my probably somewhat overdeveloped and possibly overly bureaucratic and orderly nature, I think that from his standpoint it served a function, although it gave some of us a pain and difficulty sometimes. Let me say at this point, whatever it may have been, a meeting with the President was always - the only term I can use is - zestful. It was never cut and dried. You never knew exactly what was going to happen, and there was always a great deal of zest in working with him and working for him. I think all of us that were around him felt that very much.

B. Did you have the feeling that he sometimes made quite an original contribution to a meeting in the sense of bringing in new ideas, new perspectives, on the problem at the table?

J. Yes, I would say so. I am trying to recall some specific instances. He did it more by indirection rather than by direction. He did it more by the questioning technique - the probing, questioning technique - than by direct contribution.

B. Well, it was a lot of fun working for him. Did you ever see him lose his temper in these meetings - or let his emotions carry him away - was he always very cool and contained?

J. He always gave the impression of coolness. It was one thing - he always gave you a sense of confidence and coolness around him. It was one thing he was always able to inspire, even during the most critical periods of the Cuban affair. As far as my own observation was concerned, you always felt that he was - sometimes even a little casual, I would say. But he certainly never gave the impression of the deep nervous and emotional energy that you knew was at work within him.



B. Well, this really brings us, as far as your specialized relationships with him are concerned, down to the Cuba crisis. Let me say before that, I gather you were involved in that curious exercise in February 1961 after the Bay of Pigs in a second look at Cuba. but that you were not directly involved with the President on this. You worked with Lansdale and company on some . . . .

J. Yes, we shouldn't miss that period. General Ed Lansdale was brought in and given a wide mandate to "do something" about Cuba. I am trying to remember - it had a - it was a very tightly held operation and elaborate offices were set up over in the Pentagon. I again represented the Department on this. Elaborate plans were produced. Serious frictions were set up between Lansdale and CIA. You see, a part of the trouble in many of these things - I think maybe it goes somewhat back to the Adolf Berle period as Coordinator of Latin American Affairs. Ed Lansdale was Coordinator of Cuban Affairs. The President had the sense that if you had a problem, you put somebody in charge of it - and told everybody that they had to work for him. The big and old Departments of the Government find it very difficult to work this way. And it doesn't work because ultimately it is the Secretaries that have to dispose of the resources. It is the Secretaries that have to approve the spending of money. And it is very difficult to give somebody other than the President himself - and the President himself of course has it - it is very difficult and bureaucratically a problem for the President to seek to delegate that authority to any other individual. I can think of the Berle operation and of the Ed Lansdale operation - the two that come to mind at the moment - I am sure that there were others - at which this concept was tried

and it really didn't work out very well. The Lansdale operation fizzled out into virtually nothing - not from lack of trying and not from lack of co-operation even - I think everybody tried to cooperate very, very loyally with it, but the problem simply was not soluble by such methods. You see, what would happen in something like this - as I recall it, particularly in the Lansdale operation - various covert operations which would have fairly high noise levels were planned and then, when the President came up against the decision would you go ahead and would you not go ahead with this particular thing, he would often draw back from it, for understandable and sound reasons at the time.

B. Was the President meeting directly with this group, or how was he getting these put before him?

J. As I recall it, Mac Bundy was putting these things before him at the time. He met in the early days of it, a few times, with General Lansdale. But as I recall it, Mac Bundy put it before him, mostly.

B. How long did this go on? It started in the summer or spring of '61?

J. It started in the summer of '61. As I recall it, it must have been five or six months.

B. It fizzled out long before the missile crisis.

J. Yes, it was - as I recall it, it was nominally still in existence at the time of the missile crisis but it didn't figure in and was formally liquidated shortly after the missile crisis.

B.. By the time you got to all of these special projects like getting the prisoners back, you know, Donovan's operation and the medicine shipments, etc., all of these in effect, as special projects, replaced the Lansdale operation, I guess, didn't they?

J. Oh, entirely so.

B. The Attorney General had moved.

J. Entirely so. And you see the Lansdale operation was replaced by the Coordinator of Cuban Affairs in the Department.

B. Oh, that is the historical continuity of it.

J. That's the historical continuity of it. Going back to this Coordinator idea, we set up - I can't remember - it must have been the summer of '61 - we brought Cottrell back from CINCPAC, where he was POLAD, and he was made Coordinator of Vietnamese Affairs, and then on the liquidation of the Lansdale operation, after the Cuban missile crisis, a Coordinator of Cuban Affairs was set up in the Department, who is now John Grimmins. These operations were set up to provide a strong focal point of coordination within the Department of State on these operations, and in general I think it worked reasonably well. This was in part, very frankly, the Department's answer to the effort to set up outside coordinators - or to set up coordination over in the Department of Defense. as was done with Ed Lansdale.

B. This in a way - I guess the President really came back to more and more conventional solutions to these organizational problems, and even though he had a penchant for wanting to designate somebody to deal with them, he was prepared to designate them more and more back within the regular machinery.

J. Yes, as time went on he was prepared to do so. Well, I think this brings us up pretty well to the Cuban crisis and much has been written about this.

Tape #3 for the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library by U. Alexis Johnson

I am making this tape from my home in Saigon. I commenced making these recordings for the Memorial Library with William Brubeck, who was my interviewer during the time that I was in Washington. Before we had an opportunity to finish the tapes - the job that we had undertaken - I was suddenly transferred to Saigon upon the resignation of Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador here. The President made the decision and asked me to serve on a Tuesday, at the end of June, and I left on Friday directly for Saigon by KC-135 tanker in order to arrive here before Henry Cabot Lodge left. I was followed some ten days later by Maxwell Taylor who had been appointed as Ambassador. I was asked to serve as Deputy Ambassador to Ambassador Taylor. Hence I did not have an opportunity to finish these tapes before leaving for Saigon, and here in Saigon I have no one who would be a suitable interviewer for me. Hence I am undertaking to finish this without an interviewer. I have this afternoon finally had an opportunity to read over and make editorial corrections, which were very minor, in the first two tapes which I had made with Brubeck as interviewer.

On re-reading the transcript, I found that there are a few items which I would want to go back over and pick up -- items which have some interest and relevance, I believe -- some of the matters we were discussing in those days.

On the earlier tape, in discussing the situation in Laos, and President Kennedy's attitude toward it, I referred to the understandable reluctance that he had in using American ground forces in Asia, particularly in remote areas such as Laos. This has also been true with regard to

Viet-Nam, although the question of specifically introducing American ground forces into South Viet-Nam had never arisen, nor has arisen up to this time. One of the things that influenced him, which I forgot to recall on prior tapes were General MacArthur's views. I do not have here with me the record, but I well and vividly recall the luncheon President Kennedy had for General MacArthur after the General had made his last trip to the Philippines. This must have been about two years ago. General MacArthur came back from the Philippines, President Kennedy had a small luncheon for him at the White House to which he had invited a few Congressional leaders. I do not recall all of the names now, so I will not try to recite them. I believe that Roswell Gilpatrick from Defense was there, if I remember correctly, and I was there from the Department of State. General MacArthur had obviously aged (in this connection, I might note that I had known him and served with him in the Philippines and Japan) but he was still in very fine form and talked with his usual eloquence. President Kennedy and the Congressional leaders, for the most part, listened to General MacArthur talk. One of the things that was apparent in General MacArthur's discussion at the luncheon table was his view that never under any circumstances should the United States ever introduce ground forces on the mainland of Asia, his thesis being that they could be and would be overwhelmed by the massed manpower of Communist China. Although much of this, in my own view, is not correct and not rational, particularly in Southeast Asia, where the amount of manpower that Communist China would be able to bring to bear is very limited by the logistics factor, nevertheless, it made a very deep impression on the President and on all of those that

were present. And I think that for the rest of the time he was in office this view of General MacArthur's also tended to dominate very much the thinking of President Kennedy with respect to Southeast Asia, as I am sure it also dominates the thinking still of many of the leaders in Congress.

In the last part of tape #1, and tape #2 as well, I discussed the formation of the special group for counterinsurgency. This brings to mind the subject of my relations with Bobby Kennedy insofar as relations with the President are concerned. After General Taylor was appointed as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and thus left the White House, I assumed the Chairmanship of this group. There was much discussion on General Taylor's departure as to who should be Chairman. Bobby, I know, felt that he would like to do so, but we in the Department of State, as well as in the Department of Defense, felt that this was really not a proper function for the Attorney General. We felt that the Attorney General, having given the spark in getting it launched and its now being well underway, it needed to be kept within the framework of the Departments if it were going to be effective. There was, I think, agreement between Mac Bundy, Dean Rusk and myself that, with the departure of General Taylor, ideally it would be best to have the function transferred to the Department of State where by normal organizational process it should be. However, it was decided that, rather than to try to move it to the Department, in order to give Bobby a place on it, it would be kept in the White House with myself as Chairman and Mike Forrestal of the White House staff representing the White House. This was the one group which gave Bobby an opportunity to reflect his

interest in foreign affairs, that is, one group other than the National Security Council, and there was a tendency, an understandable one I suppose, on the part of Bobby to get the group to go pretty far afield from its original and agreed to charter to get into all kinds of business involving foreign affairs as well as defense matters. One of my problems as Chairman was to try to channel this interest and prevent it from upsetting the normal processes of government which were, after all, not working too badly. Certainly, if they were not working well, this was not a good place to try to do anything about them. However, it was a very useful forum within the context that we were seeking to work -- coordinating the work of the Departments in the counterinsurgency field. We were able through the group to get a great deal of increased emphasis on the part of the AID program in police activities abroad, and our sponsorship and support of police activities was very badly needed. The AID administration had come in with Fowler Hamilton at its head, and there was a tendency to feel that the police really were not a part of AID and a tendency to shove off their responsibilities with respect to police. There was also a tendency to feel, I think it fair to say, that economic development for its own sake was a desirable objective, without relating it too closely to the political and military objectives which we had around the world, and there was also a tendency to feel that economic matters should be separated from military and political matters, that economic matters should not be, should I say, well, dirtied with military affairs. This Special Group did a great deal to get action in the field, which action was needed, I think. We were able to accomplish a great deal. However, Bobby was at

times difficult to work with, although my own personal relations with him were always good. I found him difficult as a member of the group. He would tend to come to meetings not well prepared, understandably so, because he was doing a lot of other things. He would bore in with some lower officials of the Government who had perhaps not answered his questions satisfactorily, grab onto a problem, and figuratively shake the unfortunate official who might be making the presentation and then leave. It is entirely true that a lot of shaking was necessary in the bureaucracy, and it was entirely true that AID was properly the recipient of a great deal of this because AID procedures were slow and cumbersome, and they were not doing a good job in many fields. Bobby's shaking and spurring of them undoubtedly accomplished a useful purpose. However, I felt that he tended to forget that he was not just Bobby Kennedy, but he was the Attorney General, and a more junior official of government was at a very serious disadvantage in dealing with him. I remember on one occasion an official of AID had not made a very satisfactory presentation, or at least Bobby didn't feel that it was very satisfactory, and Bobby got up and slammed the chair on the floor and stalked out of the room, slamming the door. I did not feel that this was a proper way to treat the group or to treat the official who was involved. Following this, I discussed the matter with Mac Bundy and the Secretary and asked to be relieved of the responsibility as Chairman of the group. It was agreed that Averell Harriman would assume the chairmanship, and everyone thought that Averell would be able to handle the situation better than I would. Let me say, simply as a parenthetical note, that my observations of the group after Averell took it over led me to feel that Averell did not do much better in handling and controlling the situation than I had done.



You always had the feeling in dealing with Bobby that he was the fearless watchdog on behalf of the President. He had enormous possessive pride in the President, and he was looking after the President's interests in a way which, he felt, that the President could not do. In this I certainly take no exception but his special relationship with the President and the attitude he took towards the President could often cause, and did cause, difficulty for other members of the government who did not have the same relationship. Nevertheless, when it came to the crunches on the important things, it is my own experience that Bobby was always sound, his instincts were right. He might not be too well informed, he might fix on the wrong things, but he was generally sound on the big issues, and I found this to be particularly true when it came to the missile crisis in Cuba, about which I will talk later.

Before turning to the missile crisis, I might at this point say a few words about the special group without the term "counterinsurgency" attached to it, a group that was sometimes known as the "5412 Committee" from the National Security Council decision that originally set it up. Subsequently, not long before I left Washington, the name was changed to the "303 Committee". This is one of the most successful and tightly held groups in Washington, and one, I feel, served the President well and in which the President took a great deal of interest. Its name was changed to the "303 Committee" because of the publication of a book which gave the names of members of the Committee and a little bit of its functions in a somewhat distorted form. So as to maintain its cover, we simply changed the name of the committee. "303" comes from the NASAM, i.e., National Security Council Action Memorandum No. 303, which established it and took the place of the 5412 Committee. This was the committee which dealt with all the

covert action programs of the CIA. It had been set up to deal with these programs and to find a focal point at which governmental decisions could be made. Let me say that throughout my service in Washington, there was never, to my knowledge, any foundation for charges of free wheeling by the CIA. All programs originated by the CIA itself or proposed by other agencies, and many were proposed within the Department of State itself, were carefully staffed and handled by this committee. Its chairman was Mac Bundy throughout my service there. I represented the Department of State, Ros Gilpatrick, and later, Cy Vance, represented the Department of Defense. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sat on it on occasion, if problems of interest to the Joint Chiefs were considered, and of course the Director of the CIA, first Allen Dulles and then John McCone. This group met at least once a week, or more often at call. The procedure was proposals for action by the CIA, especially in the field of political action, reconnaissance, reconnaissance proposals by the Department of Defense -- the whole field, you might say, of clandestine intelligence and political action were always carefully considered by this group. The normal procedure was for a proposition to be submitted to the members of the group prior to the meeting. We would have this staffed and obtain opinions from each of the Departments if occasion arose, and then come to the meeting prepared to discuss it in depth and to reach decisions, or to make recommendations to the President on decisions that he should make. Of course, my position was not always an enviable one. In general, the CIA and Defense, being action agencies, would come up with ideas which had obvious political problems or political difficulties related to them, and I was, I think with good humor, known in the group as "Dr. No". For the most part, though,

I would say that ninety-five percent of the time we were able to arrive at a decision within the group on a coordinated recommendation to be made to the President. Where our views did not coincide, the differences of view would be presented to the President for his decision, and I can think of ~~no~~ few cases in which he did not uphold the position that I had taken on behalf of the Department. I would consult in the Department with the Assistant Secretary of the geographic area concerned on most matters, and having a fairly good feel for the Secretary's views, I would act generally upon my own initiative after obtaining the views of the Assistant Secretary if an Assistant Secretary were involved. On some occasions, I would, of course on important issues, obtain the views of the Secretary. On very important ones where the group was not able to arrive at a decision, or it was a matter of such magnitude that the President should have all the facts clearly in front of him before reaching a decision, there would be a meeting with the Secretaries of State and Defense, Mac Bundy, John McCone, myself, and the President in order to get the President's decision on the matter. I simply mention the group here because I think it should be recorded now that our intelligence operations and our clandestine political activities abroad were not at any time during my service in Washington -- I am not relating this to my service, but simply to my knowledge -- were not in any sense free wheeling on the part of anybody, but were always very carefully staffed and very carefully considered at whatever level they should be considered. For the most part, of course, we tried to protect the President and not take things to him on which he did not need to reach decisions, and we tried to take responsibility on ourselves. The success

of the group depended very heavily upon preserving its anonymity, and except for the book that I mentioned, I can't remember the author, its anonymity was well preserved throughout the period that I was serving in Washington.

Well, now we turn to the Cuban missile crisis in the fall of 1962. First, let me say that this entire crisis can be broken down into several quite distinct sections. In my own mind, it breaks down into four periods, that is, the period prior to the discovery of the missiles on the flight of October 14, and the readout on October 15, i.e., the whole history of the intelligence effort which finally led to the discovery of the missiles. Then there is what I would call the planning period after the discovery and identification of the missiles on October 15 up to the President's speech on Monday, October 22. On Monday, October 22, with the speech we moved to what I would call and characterize as the action period. This action period continued until Sunday, October 28, when Khrushchev announced that they were going to withdraw the missiles. The fourth and final period you might call the post-October 28 period, i.e., the period during which we were negotiating on details with the Soviet Union, and the missiles were finally pulled out, and the negotiations that have taken place and actions that have taken place since that time.

With respect to the pre-crisis period, many people have made statements that if only this recommendation of theirs had been carried out, or that recommendation of theirs had been carried out, or if only people had listened to them better than they had, that the missiles might have been discovered earlier than they were. There have also been statements made which, by

implication at least, say that the Department of State and the Secretary of State, by various views that they held or by decisions they made, prevented earlier discovery of the missiles, particularly the programming of the U-2 flights.

Let me say that being intimately familiar with the whole program of U-2 flights and all our other efforts at intelligence acquisition in Cuba, I know of no proposal that was made by anybody that was turned down by anybody in the Department of State or elsewhere which could have led to earlier discovery of the missiles.

Now, to turn to the planning phase, i.e., from October 15 when it was determined that the missiles were there until October 22, the time of the President's speech. I might note that this was a period of intense and, of course, very secret and closely held efforts in which I participated fully at every meeting and every portion of the inter-departmental activity and the activity with the President of which I am aware. Many accounts have been written of this period. I can say as a fact that there was no account kept by any single individual. Naturally, all of us who participated have a blur of recollections of it as a period of very intense activity and difficult to reconstruct in its entirety. An effort was made at the request of the President to do so immediately following the crisis. This was done by Frank Sieverts, of the Office of Public Affairs of the Department, who wrote a TOP SECRET account with the assistance and help of all those who participated. I worked with Frank in making up this account, I along with the others who participated, and in doing so, I had the advantage of using notes that had been kept by Paul Nitze, the only participant in the meetings.

that I know of who kept any notes at all. These were pencilled notes of a very outline form. Drawing on my recollections and drawing on Paul Nitze's notes, I have gone through Sievert's account in great detail. I have a copy of it here in front of me, and with some pencilled corrections I have made, I feel that it is as close to a true and complete account as could possibly be made, and, as far as I know, the only such account that exists. I have recommended to the Department that this document be made a part of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library files, because I believe that it is essential to those files. It is a large paper, somewhat over 200 pages of double-spaced typing. Thus I will in this account not seek to duplicate what is in that very complete and detailed account, but rather to discuss the crisis in general terms and general impressions as I recall them today, assisted, of course, by having this paper in front of me. Although the details, of course, become blurred, the emotions of that period could never be forgotten by any of those of us who lived through all of those days. Throughout that period, the one solid rock and the one thing that kept all of us on course was the steady, matter-of-fact way in which President Kennedy handled his meetings, and the attitude of calmness that he at all times exhibited. Any trace of nervousness or shooting from the hip on his part at that time could have had profound influence upon all those who were surrounding him and seeking to advise him. Much has been said about "hawks" and "doves" in the group that were advising him, and on this, let me say that I think that almost everybody changed his position at least once, sometimes several times, during those days leading up to the decision as to the action that we would take. As far as I was concerned, my own immediate reaction was that the most satisfactory and safest way

of dealing with it would be for a quick, and hopefully clean, air strike against the missiles without prior warning to Cuba or to the Soviet Union. This, it seemed to me, would present the least challenge to the Soviet Union. However, as the Air Force figures in the numbers of planes which they would require went up, and the numbers of missiles that we encountered continued to be increased, it became clear that a small quick, "clean" strike type of approach to the problem was simply not practicable, and I finally came around to the quarantine and blockade approach, along with most of the others, and this was the approach that was finally attempted. If I could be permitted a few general observations on the situation, I would like to say that the government worked together as individuals and as a government in a more magnificent manner at that time than anything that I have ever seen in the government. People exchanged views freely, people worked in full cooperation with each other, views and opinions were seldom, if ever, divided along departmental lines. So-called "doves" and so-called "hawks" could be found in both State and Defense. People were honestly searching for the best solution that could be found. I have also said since that it was a model in the ability to blend a political and a military course of action together so as to get the full benefit out of each. It seems to me that in the light of the Cuban action, the action that was taken at that time, it has now become clear that we no longer can have a war plan in isolation from a political plan. Any plan that we have must be a political-military plan such as was used in Cuba, with each item being perfectly and closely blended into the other. It was also an example, in my mind, of the use of military power without getting involved in the use

of violence, which so quickly becomes out of control. As I have told many War College classes since that time, the end of military power of course is not with shooting; the end is using it to accomplish national purposes. We used our military power and used it very successfully in Cuba without firing a shot. It is also an example of the fact that in the world of nuclear weapons today, the President of the United States has control of virtually unlimited power, and correspondingly having unlimited power, he requires virtually unlimited control. The day that a commander in the field could be given a mission and permitted to go off to carry out the mission only with broad guidance is gone. The world is entirely too dangerous for that. This I know came out, particularly during the Cuban crisis and particularly with the Navy. I remember Admiral Anderson and other Admirals of the Navy were not at all pleased at having in effect their destroyers controlled from the Cabinet Room at the White House.

However, it was only by such fine selective and detailed control that we were able to bring about the result that we did. I am convinced that any other control could have resulted in the situation's getting quickly out of hand, not because of lack of confidence on the part of anybody, but simply because the President is at the only point at which all aspects of a situation like that can be seen and the point from which all aspects of a situation like that can be seen and the point from which all actions must have careful control. It was also successful because the United States was not bluffing. We as a government and a country cannot be successful at bluffing. We meant what we said and we were able to communicate to the Soviet Union the fact that we did mean what we said, and having meant what we said, we



were able to accomplish our purpose without becoming involved in hostilities. This, to my mind, is also a lesson. I feel that in critical situations around the world that we must decide what we are going to do, and, having decided what we are going to do, communicate to the other side that the best way of avoiding hostilities and the best way of avoiding war is to be willing to go to war from causes or for reasons that are credible to the other side, and in which you are able to communicate your resolve to the other side. This, for example, we have not been as yet successful in doing here in Southeast Asia.

Going back to the subject of hawks and doves, even when it became evident that an air strike to dig out the missiles would involve a very massive attack with a great number of civilian casualties, there were still those who were honestly proposing it strongly as a course of action. At this time, Bobby Kennedy's good sense and his moral character were perhaps decisive among those who were working on the problem. Bobby spoke very feelingly of the fact that if the United States were to take such action, it would be a repetition of the Japanese action at Pearl Harbor, and neither on moral nor on political grounds would it be defensible and the United States and President Kennedy would go down as one who had wreaked a Pearl Harbor upon Cuba. He made the argument very strongly and very powerfully and had much influence on those who were working on the problem.

Following the initial meeting with the President on the morning of October 16 after the photographic readout on the discovery of the missiles had been communicated to the President, a group was formed which spent its entire time the next week working on the problem of making its recommendations.

This group, which became known as the Executive Committee, consisted of Bob McNamara, the Secretary of Defense; Ros Gilpatric, Paul Nitze, and General Taylor from Defense; from State -- Secretary Rusk, George Ball, Ambassador Thompson, Ed Martin, who was then Assistant Secretary for Latin Affairs, and myself. Then there was John McCone from the CIA, Secretary Dillon of the Treasury, and from the White House, Bobby Kennedy, MacGeorge Bundy and Ted Sorensen. We met continuously in session night and day working at the problem. We managed to maintain complete and absolute secrecy up to the very last phases of the action, that is, up to the time the President had made his speech. At various times, the President brought in other people for the meetings. Dean Acheson, Bob Lovett and Adlai Stevenson, during the latter stages, are the names that come to my mind.

There was common and implicit acceptance that we had to do something about getting the missiles out, that is, that this was intolerable, and all the discussions revolved around simply the action that could and should be taken. Only in the latter phases, do I recall, did MacGeorge Bundy raise simply as a question for discussion, not as a proposition, the discussion as to whether or not it was tolerable to retain the missiles there and in effect to do nothing. This was, of course, rejected. The fact that we had to do something was implicitly accepted by all. We normally met in George Ball's conference room, and we had no stenographers or any other outside people present. In fact, we did not even inform our own secretaries, doing most of our work in longhand. The meetings usually were simply discussions normally led by Dean Rusk, in which various propositions were rejected, considered or refined, and one of our methods of working was to take a proposition which seemed to commend itself, have the proponents of that proposition

war-game it, you might call it, that is, work out a plan of action, put up the arguments for it, and then let the others shoot at it, and examine it for its strength and its weaknesses. It finally refined down to the question of quarantine, which was finally approached, or an air strike as I have mentioned. During the various stages throughout this, we held discussions with the President, informing him of various views and letting him know our thoughts. He was at all times very careful not to express any definitive views of his own, but asked leading questions and drew out and tried to find out the weaknesses in what was being put forth. I well remember that at one of our last sessions with him before his speech, he said that perhaps it would be best for the proponents of one point of view if he did not accept their advice, because if he didn't, they would always be able to say that if he took the other and it didn't work, that if he had accepted theirs, it would have worked. But in this business there were no second guesses. President Kennedy was understandably reluctant to commit himself until it was absolutely necessary to do so, and finally did not commit himself until the very drafting of the speech that was to be given on Monday evening. The necessity of having that speech in the hands of our posts making all the preparations beforehand to deal with foreign governments on it, as well as the military preparations that were required, finally resulted in getting the President's agreement in final text on late Sunday night. It was only, in fact, during the drafting of the speech itself that some of the final decisions and details of the decisions were worked out. As far as my own role was concerned, having become a proponent of the quarantine approach, instead of drafting long papers of pros and

cons as some of the members of our group were seeking to do, I had drafted what I called a "scenario", set forth in very simple terms the exact action, both military and political, to be taken in various stages. Of course, I drew on the discussions in the group in doing this up. This scenario was discussed, and with some modifications, was the paper on this that was finally shown to the President. This scenario which was only a little over three pages, contained all of the major elements of all the actions that were taken to implement the quarantine action, both on the political and military side. In my own mind, it is a sample of the type of thing that we need to do for any future situation of this kind.

As an episode and example of the type of pressure the President was under, George Ball and I had drafted a letter which formed the basis of the letter of October 27 which the President sent to Khrushchev and finally formed the basis of settlement. The draft that Ball and I had done was quite explicit and contained within it the safeguards that we thought were important and which should form the basis of a real understanding. When we got to the White House, Adlai Stevenson was on the phone from New York with the President, with an entirely different and much, I would say, softer, less explicit draft. Adlai Stevenson's draft would obviously be useful as obtaining an immediate solution, but most of us, particularly George Ball and myself, felt that it contained within it the seeds of future difficulty. The President finally took a part of our draft and left out some of the more important points, we felt, together with a part of Stevenson's draft, and this finally formed the letter that was sent. Nothing succeeds, of course, like success. The letter did form the basis of a settlement and

did get the agreement to pull out the missiles that we had been seeking. However, its ambiguities, particularly with respect to the so-called pledge of invasion against Cuba, are continuing to plague us. Perhaps our harder draft would not have accomplished the purpose of obtaining the settlement. However, I do point this out simply to connect it with the President's desire and usual instinct to deal with the immediate matter at hand, rather than seeking to look far into the future. I am not saying he was wrong. I am simply indicating this as a facet of the way he worked, and the decisions that he made.

I will not seek to go into any more detail of the Cuban affair, but to say in conclusion that those were days that were obviously great and stirring for our country. They were great and stirring days for those of us who had the opportunity to work with a great and noble President.

I will skip over the next year and come down to Wednesday, November 20, 1963. The other senior officers in the Department being away, I had been for a few days in charge of the Department as Acting Secretary. On that day, we had received a communication from Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia, asking us to cut off our aid. I went over with Roger Hilsman to the White House at 5:30 in the evening on Wednesday, November 20, to discuss the matter with the President. We briefly outlined the problem to him and made our recommendation that we cut off aid. He went over the draft telegram that we had prepared and added some words of friendship and conciliation to Sihanouk. He was always seeking to find a means around problems. He was always seeking to conciliate; he was always seeking to understand other people and what their motives were. He could never quite accept the fact that other people would not always return his good will.

We added the phrases and words that the President wanted in the telegram and took our leave. To the best of my knowledge, this was the last official foreign policy business that the President transacted, because he left the next morning on his trip which eventually led him to Dallas on November 22.

Almost every person alive in the world at the time will always remember the rest of his life where he was, and what he was doing when he received the news of President Kennedy's death. I was having lunch on the eighth floor of the Department of State with Howard Jones, our Ambassador to Indonesia. Someone tapped me on the shoulder, called me out into the hall, and said that the President had been shot and that George Ball wanted to see me in his office right away. I immediately went to Ball's office, and he and I, listening to the radio, finally heard those dread words, "The President is dead". This great country of ours and each of us who served with him are better because he lived.

This has been recorded in Saigon on November 7, 1964, just fifteen days before the first anniversary of his death. This is the end of this tape and whatever contribution I have been able to make to keeping alive his memory and the understanding of a great President.

U. Alexis Johnson

3133 Connecticut Avenue N. W. Washington, D. C. 20008

June 11, 1977

Mr. William W. Moss,  
John F. Kennedy Library,  
380 Trapelo Road,  
Waltham, Mass.

Dear Mr. Moss:

In response to your letter of May 25 I have reviewed the transcript and stipulations related thereto of my oral history contribution to the Kennedy Library.

First, with respect to the stipulations, I have no objection to considering that those portions underlined in green or bearing a green line on the margin as now available for use by research workers in accordance with the deed executed by me. In this connection I particularly draw attention to that portion of the deed which states that direct quotes for publication will be specifically authorized by me.

With respect to those portions underlined in red, or bearing a red line on the margin, in the light of the passage of time and events, and release to the public of so much related material I perceive no reason that those portions could not now be declassified, again subject to the condition that quotes for publication will be specifically authorized by me.

With respect to the statements on pages 37 through 40, I have been abroad for most of the past four years fully occupied with the SALT talks and thus have not followed in any detail the reports of the Select Committee. However, I have now reviewed a summary of the Select Committee's reports and also reviewed the pertinent statements contained in my oral history. I have come to the conclusion that in the interests of strict accuracy there should be some amplification and clarification.

First, the community and the CIA always made a distinction between what was usually termed clandestine collection of intelligence and covert political action programs, usually called just covert action. I think that it is clear from the context that the statements in my oral history concerning the "5412 Committee" and the "303 Committee" dealt with covert action and reconnaissance. Accordingly, my statement on the absence of "free wheeling" by the CIA for the period which it covers referred to those two activities. A possible ambiguity on this point in my oral history could be removed by rewording the sentence beginning on line 13 page 38 to read: "The procedure was that proposals for covert political actions to be carried out by the CIA, and reconnaissance proposals by the National Reconnaissance Office were always carefully considered by this group." Correspondingly, the words "intelligence operations" should be replaced by "reconnaissance operations" in line 18 on page 39.

I have used the term "proposals for covert political actions to be carried out by the CIA" in the first suggested change to take account of the fact that such proposals by no means always originated with the CIA but were often suggested by others. However, such suggestions were normally staffed through the CIA before being formally presented to the 303 Committee.

Obviously, there was the possibility in specific instances of some gray area between clandestine collection and covert action. It is also well known that President Kennedy often dealt directly with subordinate officials (which, of course, he was perfectly free to do) rather than "going through channels", and Robert Kennedy was also active in this field. Taking this into consideration, after reviewing my oral history statements (as modified above), and reviewing some of the reports of the select Committee, I have no reason to change what I said.



While the principle of the 303 Committee was maintained during the Nixon administration, there appeared to be a gradual tendency to permit the mechanism to fall into disuse in favor of more direct channels between the President, his National Security Assistant and the CIA. I obviously feel that such a committee structure can be helpful to and should be utilized by the President in making his decisions on such matters.

The problem of checks and balances on clandestine collection other than reconnaissance is more difficult. Traditionally, it has been left to the discretion of the DCI as to whether the political sensitivity of a particular operation was such as to make it desirable to consult or inform anyone else. Apart from Washington, this has also been a difficult issue in relations in the field between Ambassadors and Station Chiefs. It is difficult to impose a blanket procedure that would cover all cases, but in view of the political damage that can result from exposure or mishandling of some clandestine collection operations it is a matter that requires more attention with due regard to all of the factors involved.

I appreciate being given this opportunity to comment on my oral history and hope that these observations will be helpful.

Sincerely,



U. Alexis Johnson