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Biographical Note
Pedro Theotonio Pereira (1902-1972) served as the Ambassador to the United States from Portugal from 1961 to 1963. This interview focuses on the relations between Portugal and the United States during the Kennedy administration, especially the tension caused by Portugal's refusal to relinquish its colonies and the agreement to allow the United States to continue using the military base in Azores, among other topics.

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Pedro Theotonio Pereira– JFK #1
Table of Contents

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By Pedro Theotonio Pereira

to the

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Oral History Statement by PEDRO THEOTONIO PEREIRA made by response to a series of questions by Joseph E. O'Connor:

December 18, 1966
Lisbon, Portugal

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Dr. Pereira, did you have any particular impression of John F. Kennedy in the years before he became President of the United States? Did you have any reason to be optimistic or pessimistic regarding Portuguese-American relations when you learned that he was going to take office as President in 1961?

PEREIRA: During my first term of duty as Ambassador of my country to the U.S.A. in 1947-50, I do not remember meeting John F. Kennedy who, I understood later, was already active in politics as a Congressman for Massachusetts. This was in the years just after the War and it was a very interesting and pleasant time in the capital of the United States. The Administration was Democratic, but no less conservative for that, in the sense of maintaining the friend-

ships and traditions which America had absorbed during its march towards the leadership of the civilised world. The winning of the War had consolidated the prestige and authority of the United States and it was therefore very agreeable for a diplomat from a small European country, as was my case, to find himself accredited to Washington and to find there good and constant reminders of the reciprocal services rendered during the War and the friendly gestures that mark good relations between nations. I kept, and still keep, grateful recollections of my contacts with Truman, with whom I had the good fortune to converse many times, and also of my friendly relations with Marshall and Forrestal and, even now, I still consider the brilliant former Secretary of State Dean Acheson as one of my most distinguished and most constant friends.

To refer only to the more important events that took place in that era, I will say that I was the representative of Portugal in Washington when the Marshall Plan was introduced and during the work preparatory to the signature of the North Atlantic Pact in April 1949. To be precise, I was one of the signatories of the Treaty.

It was possibly some of these reasons that led my Government to consider me for the post of Ambassador of Portugal in Washington for the second time at the beginning of the summer of 1961, at a critical moment in the relations between the two countries.

Would I find there people who still remembered our cooperation in so many problems of the highest interest? This was the question I carried in my spirit. The new Administration of the United States seemed, in fact, judging

from what I had heard, decided on following new paths.

During the period of my second mission in Washington my contacts with President Kennedy were mostly on official occasions. I can, therefore, only contribute a very few personal notes of any interest, as would appear to be one of the principal objectives of this enquiry. However, since questions have been put to me about the political position taken by the Kennedy Administration towards Portugal, perhaps I can give some of the impressions that I gathered, from a purely personal angle in view of the fact that following my departure from Washington I entered on a period of indefinite leave and have not since returned to official duty, mainly for health reasons.

I shall begin by referring to an event that took place just after Kennedy's mandate commenced

in January 1961. It is the incident of the liner "Santa Maria", property of a Portuguese shipowner, on a cruise to the West Indies.

The ship was hijacked on the high seas by a gang made up of various nationalities including Portuguese which, very much in the tradition of the Caribbean Sea, began by killing in cold blood the officer of the watch and wounding other members of the crew who were on duty. The captain managed to communicate with the shipowner in Lisbon, and the Portuguese Government at once despatched naval warships to sea, at the same time asking the help of all maritime nations for the detention of the "Santa Maria", which carried aboard seven hundred persons including passengers and crew.

Apart from the bloody assault on a peaceful commercial ship (which made the case an act of aggression under international law), it was obvious that this was a clever, discrediting

manoeuvre connected with the campaign against the so-called "Portuguese colonies" of Africa. In fact, certain news agencies at once began saying that the hijacking of the ship "by Portuguese rebels" was part of the programme for a revolution in Angola.

And most astonishing, and revealing of the new ways of the American Administration, was the attitude adopted towards the appeals of Portugal in the matter. It was first alleged that contact had been lost with the hijacked liner, a fact that appears very strange when one realises that the Caribbean Sea is a small maritime space strongly patrolled by aircraft and ships of the American Navy. It is beyond all doubt that the latter would have intercepted the "Santa Maria" in a question of hours if they had not received orders to the contrary. Not even the information that there were a good

number of American passengers aboard the liner was sufficient argument to outweigh the temptation to take advantage of the opportunity to publicly weaken the ties of friendship with a country of "colonialist and mediaeval" concepts. But the fact is that for ten days (ten days!) the "Santa Maria" continued in the hands of her assailants with the seven hundred passengers and crew in grave danger.

Finally, as the crew was refusing to cooperate, and since the reserves of oil were finishing, the ship entered the port of Recife, Brazil, where she was immediately handed over to the representative of the shipowner.

While the ship had been proceeding on her way, within range of the radar of the American Navy, the assailants were officially promoted to "rebels" and there was even the case of an American admiral who was apparently briefed to treat them as equals. The body of the unfor-

tunate officer of the watch murdered in the attack remained closed in its coffin in the chapel of the "Santa Maria", and did not prevent various people in the United States from finding it all a very exciting joke.

Later, at the beginning of 1963, a Venezuelan ship was hijacked, also in the Caribbean Sea, but this time it was stated that the assailants were a group of communists, and not rebels against the authority of President Betancourt, who was regarded as an unfailing friend of the United States.

Those who had laughed at the case of the "Santa Maria" now laughed a little less, and ended by not laughing at all when the Cubans started hijacking American passenger aircraft. Then they began to speak of the death penalty and no longer found it at all amusing.

The "Santa Maria" episode occurred in

January 1961 and, therefore, during the honeymoon, as it were, of the newly installed Kennedy Administration.

Schlesinger's recent book has revealed, down to the last detail, the attitude of Mr. Kennedy's Government towards Portugal in relation to so-called anti-colonialism and throws much light on events that were not easy to understand at the time. But today we are able to understand how things were when, as Schlesinger relates, "the new Administration was now free of automatic identification with colonialism".

This was in the Spring of 1961. From that time on, Portugal seemed to be irremediably denounced by the United States as a case of colonialism, such as the communist world and the demagogy of the very young nations defined it, to whom the destiny of the world was now entrusted through the votes of the United Nations.

But when, during the following summer, I was nominated for Washington, there had not yet taken place the abominable crime which extinguished so early the life of Kennedy, nor had his adviser Schlesinger written yet the history of "A Thousand Days." I went, full of hope and of sympathetic feelings towards the United States, ready to devote myself once more with all good will to tightening the bonds of friendship and understanding between the two countries, and carried instructions from my Government to explain to the utmost limit of my powers the Portuguese case and to make understood the valid reasons militating in our favour. I had instructions to open all doors on our side and to demonstrate our good will to hasten the progress of our African territories insofar as was possible, both through our own efforts and through the resources of friends who might wish to help.

On the very day of my arrival in Washington in the old house of the Embassy where I had already passed some memorable years, I received a friend who said to me: "Do not feel hopeful about the success of your mission. The atmosphere is against Portugal. We here in America are still suffering from a strong anti-colonial prejudice. Besides that, we are determined to play our cards in the United Nations and we need a majority above all." This conversation was far from being encouraging but it did not demoralize me. I had come to make a great effort and this was about to begin.

First I had to see Kennedy. And I prepared myself for the usual wait for the presentation of credentials. I waited for more than a month. This was in strong contrast with the manner in which I had been received on the first occasion by Truman. And to remove any

doubts about what might now be the usual waiting period, there arrived after me a new Ambassador from the Indian Union who was received about a week after his arrival, if I am not mistaken. Obviously we had fallen into disfavour.

O'CONNOR: In December, 1961, India seized Goa by force. Do you have any praise or criticism of American action prior or subsequent to the seizure? Ambassador Adlai Stevenson condemned India's use of force before the United Nations. Did you discuss the American position in this crisis with anyone at the State Department prior to the Ambassador's speech? Were you satisfied with the statement the Ambassador made?

PEREIRA: The case of Goa was another demonstration of the tactics that it had been decided to adopt.

I had visited Goa, Damao and Diu a year before and returned deeply impressed with the beauty of those lands and the loyalty to

Portugal of those ancient peoples. There was one point on which all impartial observers were unanimous: Goa was different from the Indian Union and the inhabitants of the Portuguese territories lived better than their neighbours governed by Mr. Nehru.

However, the American attitude was invariably the same. What do you gain from holding on to those tiny territories? Give up and hand them over to the Indian Union.

We argued that those peoples had been Portuguese for almost five hundred years and that under the Portuguese Constitution they voted in the election of deputies every four years with the same electoral franchise as the population of the mother country. We insisted that the population was loyal to Portugal and that, notwithstanding the treacherous methods of the New Delhi Government, there were practically

no dissident Goanese. The few who disagreed with Portuguese sovereignty were ingenuous in not understanding that if Nehru took over Goa it would be to "Indianize" that fragment that was both Asia and Europe simultaneously, with roots reaching down five centuries, and a religion, culture, civilisation and way of life in striking contrast to the backwardness and misery of the Indian people.

Schlesinger's book, which I have already mentioned, related some curious details about the events that preceded the Indian attack on Goa. Nehru had come to Washington in November 1961 to create friendly personal relations with Kennedy and for this reason was received in the close intimacy of the President's family with official formalities reduced to a minimum.

"Five weeks later", as the former adviser of Kennedy writes, "Nehru ordered his troops

to invade the Portuguese territories."

Adlai Stevenson made, at the time, a vigorous statement in the Security Council but it was already a lament over the consummated fact for, not only had the United States decided to give their unconditional support to the Indian Union but also the Soviet veto was there to cut short all thought of reparation. [Would you elaborate on the Statement that ". . . the United States decided to give their unconditional support to the Indian Union . . ."? Did the United States take any action in accord with Portuguese wishes to forestall or postpone Indian action against Goa?] It did not occur to anyone now to demand that the Indian Union justify the conquest of Goa with a popular referendum carried out under the auspices of the United Nations, or even of the great American democracy, as had been frequently

requested of Portugal. That was only to be requared of Portuguese "colonialism".

While it was possible to ask the intervention of the United States to prevent the Indian assault of Goa, we Portuguese, old friends of America, made desperate efforts to play our last cards in defence of the Portuguese and Christian population of Goa, Damao and Diu. I recall that at my last interview at the State Department before the attack I said: "At least, send an American warship to anchor in Pangim. And give shore leave to the sailors, recommending that they take their cameras and films. The Indians will not dare to advance with such witnesses around". But the dice had been thrown and there was nothing more to be done.

Nehru worte to Kennedy with his usual hypocrisy complaining of Stevenson's sppech

at the United Nations and, certainly to quieten the Catholic scruples of Kennedy, added: "You may be interested to know that even the Cardinal Archbishop of Bombay, the highest dignitary of the Roman Catholic Church in India, who is himself a Goan, expresses his satisfaction with the Goa action". Cardinal Gracias used to affirm always that he was Pakistani. But it now suited Nehru that he should be Goanese!

Now we know from Schlesinger that Kennedy's intimate reaction to the attack on Goa was expressed in a private letter he wrote to Nehru, in which he stated: "You have my sympathy on the colonial aspect of this issue".

O'CONNOR: The Portuguese-American agreement providing the United States with access to a base in the Azores was destined to expire at the end of 1962. Before the expiration date, however,

Portugal agreed to continue to extend access to the United States without the renewal of a formal agreement. Would you care to discuss how and why this decision was reached?

PEREIRA: The Portuguese-American agreement for the use of an air base in the Azores originated in the concession by Portugal to the United States of facilities similar to those already granted to Great Britain at a difficult period during the Battle of the Atlantic in the summer of 1943.

The utilisation of bases in the Azores by the allied forces represented a grave risk taken by Portugal when the world was was still far from reaching a definite phase. The help given to England was granted by virtue of the alliance existing for several centuries between the two countries. As to the United States, they obtained the same facilities in another of the

Azores Islands by guaranteeing their agreement to the restitution to Portuguese sovereignty of any overseas territory occupied by the enemy at the end of the war.

I accompanied this subject in its various stages from 1944 up to the present and had occasion to discuss it with some of the more important American personalities.

The initial agreement established that its terminatinn would be the end of hostilities. And that is what happened: when the War ended and mutual obligations had been fulfilled, the Americans withdrew from the airport of Santa Maria in the Azores, but immediately announced that it would be an enormous convenience to them to maintain an air base in that zone of the Atlantic.

The matter was discussed at length and a friendly agreement was reached between the

two countries in February 1948, when the negotiations for the Atlantic Pact were already well advanced. In this connection, the then Secretary of Defense wrote a letter to Prime Minister Salazar in which he affirmed:

"The important military facilities on Santa Maria Island in the Azores which your Government permitted us to use during the recent war proved to be an invaluable asset in the victory of the United Nations."

"Since the war, our military aircraft have been permitted by your Government to use transit facilities at Lagens Field in the Azores. These facilities have been of great value to us in maintaining safe and efficient lines of communication with the American forces of occupation in Germany and Japan. In the agreement of February 2, 1948 your Government has very generously made it possible for us to

continue to maintain these lines of communication through the Azores in the most satisfactory manner.

The responsibilities of the United States Government as one of the occupying powers still continue and we appreciate with deep gratitude the goodwill and spirit of international cooperation which the Government of Portugal has displayed in its willingness to assist us and to participate in the maintainance of international peace and security and the reconstruction of Europe."

These remarks of the Secretary of Defense expressed a noble and sincere reaction which was all the more justified because Portugal, in making this concession to the armed forces of the United States did not accept any form of rent anymore than it had done during the war. This was in a certain way its greatest contri-

bution to the defense of the West and a continuatimn of the cooperation born during the war. This contribution was to prove very important in an emergency, as was seen at the time of the air lift to save Berlin.

Through its mechanism of tacit renewal, the Azores agreement remained in force up to the 31st December 1962. The American military authorities did not hesitate to classify its maintenance as indispensable. It may be recalled, for example, that in the summer of 1961 the Joint Chiefs of Staff declared the Azores base "essential to American security in case of trouble over Berlin".

In spite of being unjustly and unnecessarily harrassed by the American Government to abandon its overseas heritage, Portugal did not lose sight of its concept of the defense of the West. [Could you be more specific with regard

to the harrassments of Portugal by the United States government in connection with the Portuguese overseas territories?] It was obvious that only the fear of not having the Azores agreement renewed moderated the New Frontier's sympathy with anti-colonialist policy. It is Schlesinger himself who, in his above-mentioned book, confesses that "the dilemma left us no choice but a moderating policy on Portuguese questions in the United Nations" and also that "without the Azores problem we would have unquestionably moved faster in our policy toward the Portuguese colonies".

Kennedy's adviser also writes, in relation to Goa: "It was not a high point of American diplomacy".

Finally, the Portuguese Government announced simply, without any formal instrument of renewal,

that America could continue to make use of the facilities that had been granted up to then. Portugal could thus terminate the use of the Azores base by America whenever she felt like doing so, but showed that she had not lost sight of the vital issues involved. [Could you explain in more detail Portuguese reasons for renewing the Azores agreement? If no attempt was made to use this agreement as a means of putting pressure on the United States it would be good to bring this out more clearly.]

O'CONNOR: During the first half of 1962 there appeared numerous articles in the American press discussing the strained relations between the United States and Portugal. You stated, in a speech before the National Press Club of Washington, that the United States had a distorted view of Portuguese policy. Looking back on this period now, do you feel there were any ways by which

these strains could have been avoided or any actions which could have been taken or omitted which would have soothed the situation?

PEREIRA: I was pleased to speak to the National Press Club of Washington in March 1962. It was a good opportunity to clarify certain ambiguities and to firmly state the Portuguese point of view - I hope I succeeded in doing so!

What I have said already about the reasons for the position taken, that so greatly damaged our good relations with the United States, shows clearly the tendency there was in certain events to judge us by double standards. And These ideas were used at all levels of the social scale and with a frequency that became almost insupportable.

The distortion to which I referred in my speech to the National Press Club was at its height at that time. The misunderstandings

and lack of consideration towards the persons and affairs of my country were a daily occurrence, and it was impressive to see the haste shown by the United States to sacrifice the interests of allies and destroy the rights of an old overseas country, such as Portugal, just to please some of the newly emerged nations that had, without delay, been integrated in the mechanism of the United Nations.

O'CONNOR: It has been stated that the United States became more sympathetic toward Portuguese policy afer mid-1962. Do you agree with this? If so, what do you feel were the reasons for the improvement?

PEREIRA: Much water has flowed under the bridge since I left the United States in November 1963. The events in Africa have taken a very different course from that expected by the wishful thinking of many nations and many politicians. Indeed,

the policies of the U.S.A. have considerably modified in the last two or three years, due mainly to the pressure of events. The present picture of the liberated countries of the dark continent does not permit the optimism which was the dominant note when I went to the States for the second time.

The Portuguèse African provinces continue to be under attack from over the borders of the neighboring countries which have given hospitality to the various, and chaotic, movements of liberation. It is no longer the fashion for the Press to allude to the state of rebellion in Portuguese Africa because the populations under the Portuguese flag are more peaceful and progressive than many of the new countries. The facts prove abundantly that Portuguese Africa is able to survive, and that full modernisation is under way.

It was in November 1963 that I saw President Kennedy for the last time. I had been on a visit to Portugal and now returned to Washington to relinquish my post.

When I appreached the Head of Protocol to ask for an appointment for my farewell call on the President, he told me that Mr. Kennedy had heard of my arrival and was anxious to see me and that, in fact, he had already anticipated my request.

My appointment was for 9:30 a.m. at the White House. I immediately had the feeling that the President wanted me to leave with the most friendly impression possible when I saw little John-John entering Kennedy's office before his father's arrival to start the day's work.

Our long talk was frank and cordial. The President put many questions to me about my

past diplomatic posts, and especially my first mission to Washington in the late forties. Only two subjects of the present relationship between our countries were broached. Kennedy wanted me to convey to my Minister for Foreign Affairs, Franco Nogueira, a message about the forthcoming United Nations meeting. He asked me to emphasise to him that the United States were not responsible for a motion that, it was rumoured, would be presented by the group of Scandinavian countries. The United States had not taken any initiative in the matter nor were they trying to create further difficulties for Portugal.

Since it was not possible to agree on all points, the best method to reach understanding was to explore the fields in which there was more probability of cooperation.

I agreed, but did not omit to say that part

of our sensitivity on the situation in Africa originated in the ideas put forward by countries or persons without any experience on the subject. Portugal had an experience of several centuries in dealing with those problems and it could not be denied that she had created multi-racial societies that only asked to be allowed to develop in peace and without racial hatred. Kennedy seemed to accept my explanation with ggod will and observed that it was true that the Scandinavians had not even any Negro populations in their own countries.

The conversation turned to the situation in Angola and I asked the President whether he had read an article published that very morning in the New York Times by Lloyd Garrison, under the title "2,200 More Rebels Push into Angola - Newly Trained Troops QuitoTraining Camp in Congo?" I handed him the clipping and he read

it quietly. I noticed that he was particularly interested in the origin of the weapons mentioned in the article: "Algeria." I merely observed that during my early months in Washington I had had the greatest difficulty in explaining the truth about the so-called state of rebellion in Angola, but that now everybody could read the facts in the press.

The conversation returned to my missions in the foreign service and Kennedy showed great interest in various questions related to the many years I spent as Ambassador in Spain. He showed particular interest in the neutrality of the two countries during the Second World War despite the pressures exercised by the Axis.

At one point he suggested that we should walk a little in the garden. The autumn leaves were still on the trees and the garden was beautiful, as always.

Kennedy, knowing that I was a founder member of the Sail Training Association, brought the talk around to sailing ships. He referred to the forthcoming "Operation Sail 1964" organised by an American committee to bring into New York a large fleet of sail-training ships. I was very pleased to give all particulars as the European assembly of the vessels for the great trans-Atlantic race was to take place in Lisbon. With a broad smile, Kennedy asked, "Are you coming?" I answered that I would do my best. The number of Tall Ships coming into New York harbour would certainly make it an unforgettable occasion for all those who love sail. The President said: "You can count on me. I too will be there on the Fourth of July."....

But he was not. A few days later he was killed by an assassin very far from the shade of the sailing ships at sea. [The difference

Between the coldness of your reception in Washington and the warmth of your farewell call is striking. Did the contrast between the two meetings indicate a significant change in Portuguese-American relations?]