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Biographical Note
J. Graham Parsons (1907-1991) was the ambassador to Laos from 1956 to 1958, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs from 1959 to 1961, and the ambassador to Sweden from 1961 to 1967. This interview covers the political situation in Laos, the transition from the Eisenhower to Kennedy administrations, and United States foreign policy concerning Europe and Southeast Asia, among other topics.

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By J. Graham Parsons

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J. Graham Parsons
J. Graham Parsons

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Oral History Interview

with

J. Graham Parsons

August 22, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: If you don't mind, I wonder if we could go back to the time that you became ambassador to Laos. How did your appointment to Laos come about?

PARSONS: Well, it came as a great surprise to me. I was at that time minister at our embassy in Tokyo and had been for nearly three years. The director general of the Foreign Service, who came through for a meeting, called me aside as soon as he arrived and said, "The president would like to appoint you as ambassador to Laos, if you will accept." So I said that I had never turned down an assignment, that I was greatly honored and very surprised to be offered an appointment as an ambassador at that stage, and I was ready to go at any time that they saw fit. I have a considerable background on Far Eastern affairs, having started in Japan in 1932 and subsequently served in Manchuria and in India, but never before then in Southeast Asia. But my French is reasonably adequate, and I was delighted to learn something about Southeast Asia.

O'BRIEN: French was an important prerequisite in this period, wasn't it?

PARSONS: I don't recall ever doing business in English with any senior Lao official while I was there. There were a few who spoke a limited amount of English, including the prime minister himself, Souvanna Phouma, during most of my time, but French was the language which we used around the city in talking with educated Lao and also the language in which we did business, both written and oral.

O'BRIEN: What were your impressions of the French withdrawal from Indochina and the, you know, increased presence of the United States in Southeast Asia after the Geneva Conference of 1954?

PARSONS: Well, I came into the picture in the spring and summer of 1956, and among the givens was the fact of French withdrawal after the political debacle in France and the military debacle at Dienbienphu. It was something which one accepted and went on from there.

The immediate aspect, of course, that interested anyone who had a responsible role for the United States was the consequences of what we had decided to do late in 1954, to step into this rather critical, rather ominous situation. By 1956, the pattern was clear that we had to accept the material responsibility of supplying the Lao army, which was one of the key elements in the Lao situation, and it meant a considerable expenditure of funds in a country which generated no foreign exchange and very little in the way of taxes.

So we immediately had a very serious political problem, the consequences of supporting the army. We also had a very serious balance of payments and budgetary problem as regarded Laos aspects. The Laos budget was almost a paper exercise and as for the balance of payments, almost the only entrants on the in side, the credit side of the ledger, was what foreign exchange the United States and a few people resident there put into the pot. So these were among the critical things that came out of the decisions immediately after the Geneva Accords that confronted anyone dealing with Laos.

O'BRIEN: How were the French to work with in these years? They still have a French presence in Laos, and their people were, well, training the army, weren't they?

PARSONS: I think the French rightly considered that they were the people who really knew about Laos. They still had officers there training the Lao army who had a long history in Indochina They had a great affection for the Lao. This was to them sort of a pleasant, cultural little island in a rather turgid Southeast Asian-Indochina sea.

On the other hand, the French, I felt, were still smarting from the sudden change in their situation. Many of the French who were there were officers who sincerely believed that France had a continuing mission and should have a continuing presence in the Far East, in Indochina, specifically, and greatly regretted the end of what we often call the colonial era.

Relations with the French were never easy for me because of the basic fact that we Americans were the newcomers, and we were playing a massive role there. The French who remained often thought we were making mistakes and they were sensitive to the

fact that they had been supplanted by the United States. They tended to look on us as the new colonialists. I must say that we never looked on ourselves in that light. And most people who served in Laos, while they shared the French affection for the Lao people, would have been happy to go home quite promptly.

O'BRIEN: Well, the assistant secretary for the Far East at that time was Mr. (Walter) Robertson . . .

PARSONS: Walter Robertson, yes.

O'BRIEN: How about your own relationships with Robertson? What kind of man and person was he?

PARSONS: Well, Walter Robertson is a person for whom I have the greatest respect and affection. He was a man very much for that time, in my opinion; a strong man. A man with, above all, a consuming interest in the China problem born of his personal experience in the late war and immediate post-war period. At one time, he was assisting General (George C.) Marshall in the very difficult problem of trying to bring fire and water together in terms of Chinese communists and the Chinese nationalists. And he had very clear convictions as to the Far Eastern situation, in general.

He was extremely articulate, forceful, clear, and unswerving in his devotion to what he believed in and to the principles which he held. In addition, he was a charming person--is a charming person--a great Virginia gentlemen, and even those who differed with him most violently, respected him and liked him as a person. I felt close to him because, as time went along, he told me that he wanted me to come back to be his principal deputy in the Far Eastern bureau, and ultimately, he was responsible, more than any other individual, for my becoming his successor.

There's another unusual aspect of Walter Robertson's career as regards the State Department. When he came in as assistant secretary at Mr. (John Foster) Dulles' insistence, early on in the administration, I have heard that he didn't come with any particular affection for the career Foreign Service. Some of his experiences in China had led him to conclusions that were not entirely favorable. However, as time went on, as he worked with the group of office directors and senior officers in the field, as he came into close contact with them, he came to be a great believer in the professional Service in its dedication, the hard working quality of the officers that he met, in their all-around competence including their background of knowledge, experience and know-how.

By the end of the administration, it was a fact that for the first time in our history, so far as I know, all the ambassadors in the area of his responsibility--fourteen countries, I think--were career Foreign Service officers. This was brought about by Walter Robertson himself, although, of course, Mr. Dulles came to have great confidence in the Foreign Service, too. But, nevertheless, it's an interesting fact that Walter Robertson, who entered with a different point of view, fought through to a situation where he had only professionals working in the field.

O'BRIEN: You were talking about, you know, his experience in China. How is it, in a man like Robertson, . . . Well, I suppose you'd have to also include other people in the department as well, anyone dealing with affairs in the Far East, how does China come into their thinking about, let's say policy in a place like Laos, at this point, say '57 or '58?

PARSONS: Well, I think then as now, anybody who was seriously concerned with Far Eastern affairs recognized that while China might not be called the Central Kingdom anymore--you remember, those were the ideographs that described China in the Chinese language--it was, nevertheless, the central fact of life in the entire Far East. In practically any problem, any crisis, whether you were talking about Japan or Korea or Taiwan or Southeast Asia, the element of China and what China meant to its neighbors always had to be taken into very serious account. China was the largest fact of the area, too; and it was an enigmatic and unpredictable fact, given the difficulty of ascertaining the political and economic currents and the intentions of those who ran the country, which they could do on the basis of totalitarian methods rather brutally executed when they wished to.

O'BRIEN: Was there a great fear on the part of, oh, say yourself and other people in the department, that China had definite ambitions on Laos at this point? How does, in a sense, the presence of communism in the form of, well, the Viet-Minh, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as well as the People's Republic of China, how does this figure in the thinking of the people in the department at this point?

PARSONS: Well, as I look back on this period, which is, after all, thirteen--what is it, a dozen years ago or more--China, of course, loomed as a potential threat, in political and, potentially, in military terms also, to its weaker neighbors. Certainly nothing the Chinese ever said led one to feel reassured about their attitudes, although one could not be sure of their intentions. Sometimes one tended to equate

the words of the leaders with their actual power, which, I think, was a prudent thing to do, but may have been, at times, exaggerated. But at any rate, China was to Laos a potential menace in the background.

But in the foreground, of course, was the regime in Hanoi. Hanoi, even at that date, was supporting infiltration and insurgency in Laos through the chosen instrument of the Pathet Lao, which had no supply base in Laos. They had a geographic base in the two northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly, but their real base, their material base and their ideological base, was across the way in Hanoi. And this was an incontrovertible fact to anyone who had access to many different types of intelligence.

It was difficult to persuade the Lao government at that time, in particular Prince Souvanna Phouma, that his half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, gave his first loyalty--whether willingly or not is something else; his wife and children were either in Hanoi or in Moscow at different times--that Prince Souphanouvong gave his first loyalty not to Laos, as a true Lao at that stage, but to Hanoi and was the instrument as well as the facade behind which Hanoi operated at that time. The things which we often said, which I often was called upon to say under instructions, to Souvanna Phouma were neither very welcome to him in this respect nor accepted--at least, not outwardly. However, it's interesting that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma in these days, a decade later, (at times) says things publicly in regard to the Pathet Lao and in regard to the communists as affecting his country which are perhaps even stronger than some of the things that I used to say to him in those days. So times change.

O'BRIEN: How were you at this point and after the, I believe it was the election of '58, what were you advising the department? Of course, you left as ambassador in. . . .

PARSONS: I left in February of '58.

O'BRIEN: February of '58.

PARSONS: Yes, just after the Prime Minister (of Laos) had come to Washington, and had been received by President (Dwight D.) Eisenhower.

O'BRIEN: Right. Well, while you were there, did you have any problems with other agencies involved in foreign policy; let's say, like the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) or PEO, the Program Evaluations Office--it sort of ran the business there, didn't it?

PARSONS: That was the agency through which the supplies to the Lao army and the payments to the Lao army for salaries and minimum upkeep were routed. As in any situation like that, of course, there were problems of coordination. This was a very unstructured situation in Laos; the whole country is quite unstructured. In some ways it was more a geographic expression than an integrated, sovereign country. I say this with all due respect to the Lao. It wasn't really their fault in large part because they had been under colonial rule and administered in different segments at different times, and you remember the tortured history of Indochina in the Second World War period and afterwards. But in that unstructured situation, there were differences of opinion from time to time between the PEO office and other agencies, and difficulties, at times, within the aid now program.

The aid program there had to be developed very quickly. There were great time pressures. The army would disintegrate within a short time if it wasn't paid, and the Pathet Lao were shooting at it and expanding their efforts to infiltrate and subvert the country.

All this was at a time when it was rather difficult to recruit experienced, competent engineers, administrators, and so on--to go where? --to go to the other side of the Mekong River to an oversized village (to administer aid). So you (often) had people who did not have long discipline of government.

The aid mission director at that time, (Nicholas) Carter de Paul, who is an able man in my opinion and loyally served me as ambassador, attempted to help in every way he could. He had great difficulties with some of his people. He was given, really, an almost impossible job. But as a result of this kind of situation that I described, there were differences of opinion among the agencies, and sometimes people tended to take advantage of their direct lines to their own agencies.

I once remember finding out that recommendations had gone back to CINCPAC (Commander in Chief, Pacific), then Admiral (Felix B.) Stump in Honolulu, and to the Department of Defense of which I did not have any knowledge. I wrote to Admiral Stump or telegraphed him--I forget which now--and referred to the Executive Order and its provisions about the position of ambassador and relationships with the country team. This was not as clearly defined a situation in that Executive Order as it later became under the famous Kennedy letter of May 27 or 29--you can use either date--1961. But Admiral Stump discussed my complaint with his political advisor Ambassador (John M.) Steeves, later

my deputy in the Far Eastern bureau; and the answer that came back was that this wouldn't happen again. So there were things like that which happened from time to time, and when they were pointed out to people in responsible positions, that kind of difficulty didn't recur.

O'BRIEN: In that regard, getting back to the aid program, there was a good deal of criticism on the Hill of the aid program in those years.

PARSONS: This is very true, and I lived with that, at that time and subsequently. In fact, I still hear about some of the things that were alleged and my responsibility in this regard. I certainly understand the concern of the Hill, and it was entirely correct and proper for us to be put under rather searching examination as to how the taxpayers' money was being used in Laos.

I sometimes felt, myself, that it was never made sufficiently clear, or perhaps never sufficiently recognized, that what we were buying with the taxpayers' money in Laos was the survival of this little country, which people other than me had deemed to be strategically important and worthy of support from the standpoint of our national interest after the Geneva Accords and so on.

It is very difficult for people way back here in the United States--whether in Congress or elsewhere--to have a clear picture of what it was that we were actually dealing with on the ground in Laos in this unstructured environment. All of us Americans, I think, tend to view problems within the frame of reference with which we're familiar, and sometimes we judge the Laos aid program and other programs in Laos with the same standards and through the same prisms which we would use in examining ourselves in our American environment. It made the problem of communication rather difficult between those of us who had to do a job in the field and had a mandate to try to keep the lid on and to keep the country in being, I should say and the people back there who wanted to know why we did this, why we spent that money, wasn't it wasted and so on.

Corruption existed; corruption will be with us for a long time to come in a number of places overseas, not only Southeast Asia. Corruption still exists in places in the United States. I heard a seminar talk here just the other day about corruption in local government in the United States. We weren't talking about federal government at that time.

So with all this, I accept that there was criticism and often valid and justified criticism; on the other hand, we had to take some

risks if we were to keep our eye on the main objective. We regretted any time that moneys were diverted to personal gain. We tried to prevent this, we tried to minimize it. It extended it all the way up to high places. I don't mean the prime minister or any--I won't name any individuals, but there were people at very high levels who thought this was a pretty good thing, the American aid program, from the standpoint of their personal gain involved.

If I can take a moment more on this particular subject, one thing which was very important at that time and which did save the (American) taxpayer a good deal of money, in my opinion, and which did serve the government and the country of Laos and served our joint purposes was something which I would call monetary reform. A big spread developed between the exchange rate which we had inherited from French times--thirty-five to one for the local currency--a big spread between the official rate and the black market rate in Bangkok or, secondarily, Hong Kong, which got to over a hundred to one. The spread rose markedly when the prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, went to Peking in the summer of 1956. A number of Lao thought this was the handwriting on the wall, and they were seeking to liquidate. That's a little vignette on the types of problems and worries which we had, you see. This big spread between the exchange rates and the need for us to bring in dollars in connection with financing the army, led certain Lao to be able to play off the difference between the official rate and the unofficial rate in Bangkok--there were a variety of devices to do this.

Carter de Paul, the aid mission director to whom I referred, I think was the first to conceive that maybe we could do something about this and stabilize the kip, the Lao currency, at a viable rate. I picked up this idea, and we recommended strongly to the department and to the aid organization (then ICA, International Cooperation Administration) in the States and worried away at this for a long time. It was hard to get unified action back in Washington. They had differences there, too! But in the end, this did work out with the aid of some very able people in the International Monetary Fund, who came over at our instigation.

Incidentally, this was not an easy proposal to sell to the government of Laos, some of whose members were profiting from the arbitrage and these grossly disparate exchange rates. But nevertheless, this was accomplished, and it became one of the most stable currencies and the best backed currencies in the world--in its small way. And it was only de-estabilized later on during the Kennedy administration, when the next crisis came over Laos--or the next serious crisis.

O'BRIEN: I wonder if you could give us an insight into the personalities of the people involved in the Laotian politics at this time? We briefly mentioned Souvanna Phouma.

PARSONS: Well, the prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, personally was a very genial, affable, and courteous gentleman, in appearance, completely Lao; in manner and style, he could have been a French gentlemen, too. He spoke beautiful French, was educated in France and was very conscious of his position as a (Lao) prince of the royal blood, an aristocrat. He represented the junior branch of the royal family, and a man of about his age, who was then the crown prince, represented the senior branch of the family. The king was ill and incapacitated.

Therefore, in one domestic aspect, the prime minister was a prince of Luang Prabang, where the royal capital was, and member of the junior branch which would not inherit the throne. There were always whispers of rivalry between the different branches of the family and antipathies between some of the personalities involved. Then, as the leading politician from Luang Prabang, the northern kingdom, one of the three main areas of Laos, he had a regional aspect, too. Laos, unstructured as it was, did have its own political dynamics, although some people might call them lethargic. But there were rivalries and maneuvers and Souvanna Phouma was well alert to these.

I mention these things because in the public print, today, one hears of him primarily as leader of the "neutralist" faction. Well, there are quite other dimensions to his leadership. Also, he was a practical man. He was a civil engineer and so trained. He was largely instrumental in building the first road (between the two capitals). By then (1956), it had reverted to just a track through the jungle from Vientiane, the administrative capital, to Luang Prabang four or five hundred kilometers away. Souvanna was a man of ability. He was a man to whom everyone could talk. Some said that he was a little prone to be influenced by the last one to whom he talked. He was the most Westernized of the senior leaders--is the most Westernized of the senior leaders.

The French always believed that far and away he was the most able man and, for reasons of conviction and also for reasons of expediency, they supported him always as the man who should be prime minister. Certainly he was the Lao leader who was most skilled and experienced in dealing with the Western world and who had the most cosmopolitan outlook.

I had many, many encounters with him--many of them very satisfactory. Very often, I marveled at his courtesy when I had very difficult representations to make to him or had to tell him things that were the opposite of what he hoped for. But at times our relationships were not good. He made some highly critical remarks about me later on when I was--I think by then I was assistant secretary (for Far Eastern affairs). Eventually, after the battle of Vientiane took place, and Phoumi Nosavan's troops came in and the prime minister got into an "Air Laos" plane--he was the senior stockholder in "Air Laos"--and flew to Cambodia into exile with other Air Laos planes too, from there, in bitterness and frustration, he made extremely critical remarks about me. He could have made them about a great many other people. I didn't think my personal responsibility and his discomfiture was at all exclusive. But at any rate, except for that one particular excess of statement, I never recall being treated by him with anything but courtesy and consideration, and it was possible to have a good dialogue with him.

O'BRIEN: How about General Phoumi?

PARSONS: General Phoumi, whom I knew as Colonel Phoumi in those days, was an unusual Lao. I don't mean to suggest (by what I am about to say) that Lao were without energy or were lethargic all the time or anything of that sort, but if one takes it on a relative basis, General Phoumi was one of the most dynamic of the Lao leaders. He was energetic and ambitious. He worked hard; he played hard. He had great political ambitions, and he saw that his strong anti-communist policy commended him to military men from the outside, the men who were paying the army through PEO. There was a natural affinity which grew up there, and there were people in our government back here who thought that he was the leader who could unify the country and who could give it a viable anti-communist posture against the Pathet Lao and against the Viet-Minh, as we called the North Vietnamese who came in there--not Vietcong. This was a subject of a great deal of debate within our government, as has been well documented in many places.

I found Colonel Phoumi an engaging figure in the earlier days. I always wondered whether we didn't have some rather exaggerated faith in what he was able to do. As I say, Laos does have its own political dynamics, and there are traditional ways of doing things and traditional elements that have to be considered and brought into the picture and play their part if you're going to have a reasonable degree of cohesion and stability. General Phoumi sometimes worked outside this mold, and I think the consequences became rather evident later on. It was a tragedy, I think--and

a tragedy for the American position, too--that we (Americans) were not able always to resolve our differences with regard to General Phoumi's capabilities and just which personality in Laos was best equipped to lead the country in fantastically difficult circumstances.

People have no idea of how difficult it was, and they look at you with a rather glazed and fishy eye when you try to make this meaningful and think that you're merely trying to make excuses for things that went wrong. But I can assure you, even if everything had gone right, I would have emphasized how difficult it had been.

O'BRIEN: How about Prince Souphanouvong as to--am I pronouncing it correctly?

PARSONS: Souphanouvong? Well, everybody has their own pronunciations for these, but I thought you did it just about the way most of us do. I saw relatively little of him. It wasn't fashionable for American diplomats to see too much of communist leaders at that time in a place such as Laos, but I did find the opportunity when he became a member of the government late in my time in Laos. He was minister for planning, which was rather quixotic because this meant the minister of planning also had something to do with the U.S. aid program. I must say the Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was well aware of the anomaly of this and was very careful to try to so arrange things that it neither jeopardized Laos' chances to continue to have an aid program to the best of its ability nor become too embarrassing for me.

But as I say, I asked Souphanouvong and his wife to come to the embassy one afternoon. I remember the four of us talking--my wife and myself with him and his wife. She is a Vietnamese from North Vietnam. She is reputed to have been a communist from way, way back, which I believe to be true. She was a clever, strong woman; and he was bland, shrewd--a small man. Souvanna Phouma is quite a big man and not slim, but not obese either. But Souphanouvong was rather trim, rather small, dapper with his mustache. They were both extremely friendly at that time. They were, I presume, trying to show that they didn't have horns and tail and tried to ingratiate themselves.

I rather agreed with those who felt that Souphanouvong was not the strong man of the Pathet Lao; that there were others, who were more trained and hard-core communist agitators and leaders. I forget their names now. There were two in particular who're still active, I believe. But Souphanouvong was the nominal leader, at least, and a pretty good front man. And, I think, a man not without convictions and ability, although his approach was a rather subtle one with me.

O'BRIEN: We haven't really mentioned much about the question of ideology here in regard to these people. Did you ever have the opportunity to meet Kong Le?

PARSONS: I never met Kong Le so far as I know. He was known to some people when I was there, to some Americans in Vientiane; but he was really a rather obscure combat lieutenant at that time.

I remember when he staged the revolt of his small command in Vientiane. I was back in Washington, and there was an immediate scramble to find out all we knew about him, which was fairly limited, actually. He's a rather intriguing figure and caused us a lot of anxiety and a lot of grief at that time.

I haven't mentioned Phoui Sananikone, who was prime minister for a while and foreign minister for a while under Souvanna. He was the senior member of the Sananikone family, which if Vientiane and that central region of Laos had a leading family, I would say that they were it, at least this is my recollection. They're others who were prominent, too, but the Sananikone family were the senior merchants, landowners, businessmen, and so on and people of great prestige.

Phoui Sananikone was honest, patriotic--is, I shouldn't say was, referring to a time that's long passed, not to a person who's passed--honest and straightforward, a person who was able to bridge the gap, the enormous gap between a person of Lao background and a person of strictly Western, North American background. It was easier to feel that you had a meeting of minds with him than with any other Lao of stature with whom I dealt, and he was always eminently fair, eminently reasonable. I've never known of a case in which I thought his conduct was not as good as his word. He couldn't always deliver on things--who could? But he was one of the most able men in Laos and did his best for his country at that time. His younger brother, Ngon Sananikone, then minister of education, is still, I believe, prominent in Laos affairs. But Phoui Sananikone is a man of considerable stature.

O'BRIEN: Now, how do all these people--not only while you were ambassador, but after you came back as deputy under Walter Robertson and later as assistant secretary--in a sense, which of these people did you really feel was best, you know, qualified to, in a sense, be the leader of Laos or form a government in Laos?

PARSONS: Well, I would probably have answered this differently at that time. I now feel, in retrospect, that depending

on the circumstances, and the situation was quite different at one time, say, from another time, but at certain times, there's no question that Souvanna Phouma was best qualified. There were times when Phoui Sananikone, I think, was best qualified. They are men with quite different backgrounds and attitudes and capabilities, in a way, but they were both leaders. Phoui, in particular, I think, was quite a strong leader. There was a time of great disarray when an elderly gentlemen by the name of (Thao) Khou Abhay became the prime minister. I think for that particular moment he was the best possible choice that the Lao could have made. He was a gentleman of great dignity, deliberate, and had the respect which the venerable often have in Asia; but he was clearheaded and sensible.

O'BRIEN: Well, in October of 1960 you went on a mission with Admiral (Herbert D.) Riley and Assistant Secretary (John N.) Irwin. And that particular mission was, of course, to resolve a--well, perhaps I should just ask you how did it initiate? Or, how was it initiated? How was this. . . .

PARSONS: I don't know precisely; I can only speculate. But I'll do so quite frankly. I was having my summer holiday at the end of September or first week in October--it had been continually delayed--and I had two weeks off. And I got a telephone call several days after I arrived at my house in Stockbridge, Massachusetts--it was a Friday night, I think--and I was told that they wanted me in Washington the following morning and to take the first plane. I said, "There isn't any way to get to Washington by tomorrow morning from here unless I get in the car and drive four hundred miles." So an Air Force plane was at Albany the next morning, early.

I arrived in Under Secretary--I think Acting Secretary that particular day--(Douglas) Dillon's office. And he said, "We'd like you to go out to Laos tonight with Herb Riley, deputy at CINCPAC, and Jack Irwin (the man who's now mediating in the Peru business)." Jack was then assistant secretary for international security affairs in the Pentagon, and I knew him well, respected him and liked him. I knew Riley less well, but also respected and liked him. I was told that there were a good many differences of opinion between the Pentagon and ourselves--I had some familiarity with these differences--and the thought was that it might be useful to go out and look at the situation on the spot and perhaps see if we couldn't come to a meeting of minds.

This was a very confused period. General Phoumi was poised in Savannakhet with his right-wing troops, Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane with the neutral troops. The Prime Minister in Vientiane was resisting Pathet Lao encroachments up near the Plain of Jarres, as I remember--I'm a little hazy on some of these details, but I think this is correct--and there were quite real differences of opinion that were very resistant to compromise. Kong Le was still in Vientiane and quite independent, not yet on the road to Vang Vieng or beyond on the fork toward Xieng Khouang.

So this trip came about by somebody's idea in Washington that maybe getting three of the characters most responsible and knocking their heads together, at that time, something good would come of it. I think the timing was unfortunate. So far as I was concerned, there was an utter lack of preparation. I was only a week out of date--I'd only been on leave for a scant week, but things move pretty fast, and that Saturday there was really no opportunity to consult or to work up the trip.

But at any rate, I started off that night, and we were in Laos as fast as the propeller planes could get us there, which meant three nights without sleep, as I recall--it usually did. And then we went on our rounds, and there were various other issues and problems which intruded at that time because of a crisis in Vientiane, which affected our aid program and our relationship to Souvanna.

(Winthrop G.) Win Brown, who was our very able ambassador there, was negotiating with Souvanna under instructions from the department sent in my absence. The show had to go on, of course. I was trying to keep up with this, and I was asked to contribute at various times and did have a couple of long talks with Souvanna at that time.

But the mission, which was a very amicable one and on which we had a lot of frank conversation back and forth, I do not consider well judged as to timing or preparation or task. I was reluctant to go at the time, but there was no choice. I don't think that it was successful. I think with a little bit more preparation and a chance to talk to some of the people in the Pentagon and elsewhere before we went out, it might have been better. It might have been just the thing to clear the air if it had been going out on a basis other than sort of a shot out of a gun all of a sudden.

O'BRIEN: Well, what were you telling Souvanna Phouma at this time or asking him?

PARSONS: Well, I would speak quite frankly if I could remember exactly. But in order to put the pieces together--disunity was at its height--all that fall we had been trying to persuade Souvanna and General Phoumi to unify the government. Souvanna, in fact, held open the job of minister of defense, a key post, for Phoumi. And one time Phoumi was in the air over Luang Prabang but as so often happened, couldn't get down. There are no navigational aids to speak of, and there were low-lying clouds and with the mountains all around, he turned around and went back to Savannakhet. But we were trying, as I say, to put

the pieces together again.

The department made specific proposals. That for the time being the seat of government be moved to Luang Prabang was one--and take the assets of the treasury along with them and so on.

Another point which concerned us was that he (Souvanna) was negotiating with the Pathet Lao at a moment in history when he couldn't negotiate from any modicum of strength. Phoumi was virtually in open revolt and had his adherents. In the north, the loyalty (to Souvanna) of some of the military commanders, higher up above Luang Prabang, was withering away or had actually been made manifest by then. And Souvanna was left with very limited forces already then known as neutral or neutralist forces (including Kong Le who was not entirely under his control). He was also under pressure from the Pathet Lao and hopeful (too hopeful we thought) that he could reach some sort of an agreement with them. Well, our belief was that it would be more advantageous if he could negotiate from a little more strength. So our view was that he should postpone serious negotiation until the situation had improved a little bit.

One other question which arose at that time, General Phoumi had a large part of the Lao army in Savannakhet; in other words, a large part of the only force that could resist communist infiltration and insurgency. We wanted to keep this in being and, certainly, we in the State Department entirely agreed with the Department of Defense on this. So the problem was how could we continue to give assistance to General Phoumi's forces in Savannakhet and also continue to give assistance to his--archenemy is too strong a word--rival leader and the Prime Minister of the country in the capital at Vientiane, Souvanna Phouma; and further, what degree of support should we give to Souvanna Phouma. There were differing opinions within the U.S. government on this. But in the end, Ambassador Brown was successful in persuading Souvanna Phouma that, within limits and with certain stipulations, we might continue to support General Phoumi's forces. At the same time, we would give assistance to his (Souvanna's) forces so long as they were resisting the Pathet Lao.

And it was not very many weeks--or only a couple of months, at least--after Phoumi had come north on his initiative and driven Souvanna's forces out and Souvanna had fled to Cambodia that Souvanna came to the conclusion that I'd double-crossed him. And this was the motivation, I presume, for his saying that I was the most perfidious of men. This was a role in which I hadn't seen myself before, and I don't have any feeling of conscience about it. I didn't double-cross Souvanna at that time (or any other).

O'BRIEN: I've heard a story--and I don't know the validity of it--that Ambassador Riley. . .

PARSONS: Admiral Riley?

O'BRIEN: Admiral Riley, right--and Secretary Irwin had a meeting with Phoumi in Thailand at that time and suggested to him that he shouldn't listen to Ambassador Brown, pay any attention to Ambassador Brown. Do you remember that?

PARSONS: Well, I've heard this story, too, and I was not present at that meeting. It's been alleged in various quarters afterwards that some such thing was said. I said earlier on that Jack Irwin was somebody I knew quite well, an honorable person, a person whose integrity I trust completely--trusted completely then and would now. And I had great respect for Admiral Riley as a disciplined officer, too. I'm sorry that I did not go with them. I was under a great deal of pressure. After all, I was assistant secretary and there were other things to be done in Thailand and in Vietnam, too. I visited those posts and also Hong Kong and Tokyo on this trip. I took that particular day to attend to other business. Alexis Johnson, now under secretary for political affairs, was the ambassador there.

In retrospect, I'm sorry that I did not go with them to see General Phoumi because I think that would have scotched these rather ugly insinuations that have been made. I don't know what was actually said. I know that there are people--even General Phoumi himself, perhaps--who would have an interest in asserting that this was said to him.

O'BRIEN: How about your own relations with Ambassador Brown at this time? Did you have any differences on the policy towards Laos?

PARSONS: Often there were differences between Ambassador Brown and the Department of State at that time. I should interpose that it wasn't my policy we were following in Laos. I happened to be the responsible assistant secretary, but it was the president's policy, the government's policy, the department's policy. I was one of the instruments of it; and I was one of those who shared in formulating it.

O'BRIEN: Would you pardon me a moment. I think the tape is about ready to go out on this side.

BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I

O'BRIEN: Oh, would you like to continue there?

PARSONS: Yes, we were talking about whether there were differences between Ambassador Brown and myself as to policy, and I was saying that the policy which came from Washington was its policy, not just my policy.

O'BRIEN: Would you let me interrupt here? And that's something, I think, that we really haven't talked about--perhaps it's a little obvious. How was the policy formed towards Laos at this point?

PARSONS: Well, there's no short answer to that question in any context, and the mix between policy and operations at a critical time like that is very hard to sort out in a short answer. But at critical moments in connection with Laos, issues were taken directly to the president in meetings before him. At other times, it might be Mr. Dulles, later Mr. (Christian A.) Herter and Allen Dulles, representatives of the Joint Chiefs, Jack Irwin, myself, other people at the assistant secretary or under secretary level, Doug Dillon frequently, Livingston Merchant often.

O'BRIEN: How about Desmond Fitzgerald, was he present as well?

PARSONS: Yes, Desmond Fitzgerald, at the equivalent of my level, was very active in a great many matters relating to Far East. I had great respect for Des. He's an able officer and a devoted one. The people most concerned had no trouble in meeting when it was required, and the decision-making process was a rather direct one. The people who met had amongst them, always, people with background, knowledge, and experience in the particular problems; knew what had gone on; had the guidelines of our general objectives clearly in mind; and operated within what one would normally consider the broad framework of policy in applying that to the particular situation of the moment, complex and difficult as it might be. And from that came operations, which, at times, tended to become policy because the effect of what you do creates a situation or a precedent and so on. We could discuss all morning the policy-making process in foreign affairs, but this is suggestive, at least, of the ways in which things are done.

O'BRIEN: Who were the strong personalities behind the policy towards Laos at this point? You mentioned Brown. Certainly Fitzgerald was involved.

PARSONS: I think the people I've mentioned were probably the key people. Towards the end of his tour, Secretary Herter was deeply interested and engaged. Livingston Merchant certainly was. Dillon, until he left, was. Various members of the Joint Chiefs were involved, rightly so. The secretary of defense at times. Allen Dulles, as I've mentioned. Laos was a major problem for the administration at various times in the last few years of President Eisenhower's administration. Shall I go back to Win Brown and myself?

O'BRIEN: Right. Well, if I may, just at this point--this is a bit early. From your own understanding and long background of not only being in Laos but seeing the different parts of the overall picture as assistant secretary, what is your reaction towards policy towards Laos at this point around the point of your visit with Irwin and Admiral Riley?

PARSONS: Well, I have regrets about the visit, as I think I implied, because I think we could have done better with the visit if it had started in a little different way and had been a little better considered. I remember the feeling that I was always trying to catch up with what the purpose of the visit was and where to get a hold of the handle. This was one of the less congenial tasks that I was asked to participate in, although the people with whom I was working are entirely congenial, the two other principals beside myself are Win Brown in Vientiane and Alex Johnson in Bangkok, both of whom are close and trusted and greatly respected friends. I've sort of lost the thread of. . . . Where were we going on that?

O'BRIEN: Well, I guess what I should have said: Did you have any reservations about, let's say, supplying or supporting Souvanna Phouma, at this point, or the main threads of policy which were in effect at this point?

PARSONS: So far as I can remember, over this great distance of time and the confusion of those days, which was considerable--things were happening very fast--I think it was still our hope and purpose (I'm speaking for myself and the department's view now) that we could somehow bring about an accommodation and that the government of the country could be unified again.

There came a time when we became convinced--this was a current conviction and one which was argued at great length--that this would be beyond Souvanna's capabilities. I don't remember the specifics now, but I don't think he made it easier for us once or twice by things which seemed inconsistent. But I don't want to go beyond that because it isn't fair when I can't put

the specifics on it. But at any rate, there was a loss of confidence in Souvanna at a point in Washington. I don't remember precisely under what circumstances or when that occurred.

O'BRIEN: Well, now what were Ambassador Brown's differences with policy at this point and with the Laotian situation?

PARSONS: Well, about all I can do is to generalize. I don't remember the specific differences we had at a particular time. The man in the field often sees something a little bit differently from the people who are thousands of miles away, and we try to accomodate to that and, particularly, when we have an able and respected ambassador. But we didn't always accommodate to his views.

In general, I think that he had more confidence in Souvanna than most of the principals in Washington had. I think, in retrospect, many of the judgments which he made were extremely sound and he was a fine ambassador there.

So far as my own relations with him are concerned, which you asked about earlier, they were excellent. When there were differences, they were always on a perfectly straightforward basis on the issues. He was well aware that there were many pressures and many considerations in Washington which he couldn't know about in the field, and I'm sure that he knew that I knew that the man on the spot often has better insights than the people back in Washington. I think he feels--and he has so stated publicly--that I gave him good support. It so happens that we were classmates and close friends at Yale so there was a natural basis for trust.

O'BRIEN: Well, while you were on that visit to Vientiane and to Southeast Asia, you mentioned that you had other business to take care of in Southeast Asia. That may be a pretty good point to get into. Perhaps. . .

PARSONS: I don't really think so because I don't think it was anything more than the problems of the moment and a chance to consult on the spot instead of corresponding by telegram and otherwise over that great, long distance. Any time you find yourself out there you welcome the chance to talk to ambassadors about their problems or about things that are on your mind, face to face. It was more that than any particular problem, so far as I recall.

O'BRIEN: Well, I was thinking of the three nations across the boarder from Laos--South Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. I'm not sure whether you had any meetings with (Prince

Norodom) Sihanouk or Marshal (Thanarat) Sarit at this time, but did you detect a real concern about the problem of Laos there? In what way. . . . What I'm trying to say is are they interested in policy decisions on your part?

PARSONS: Oh yes. The Thai, as the immediate neighbors and the cousins, after all--ethnically they're the same people, and linquistically, almost--the Thais had a very intimate, obvious, absolutely unquenchable interest in the Lao situation, quite naturally, and so we consulted with them very intimately and to great advantage, too. Their points of view were always taken into consideration. One element in the situation which was interesting was that Phoumi himself was a relative of one of the Thai leaders. I forget whether it was Sarit himself. I think it was, actually; he was a cousin, I think, of Sarit. But at any rate, there was this dimension, too, to the Thai aspects of Laos.

And then in Vietnam, of course, there were plenty of things for President (Ngo Dinh) Diem and others to worry about there, already, at that time. Hanoi had already publicly set the target of eliminating Diem within a year, and they had served notice that South Vietnam was not to be allowed to continue to succeed. It was succeeding at that time as has not been as well publicized or documented as it deserves to be. I think this is one of the factors which caused the government in Hanoi to move when it did, to take its decision and--I forget now whether it was late '59 or in the summer of '60. But the communist counteroffensive, as some people have called it, as I've called it, began in Laos and in Vietnam, alike, at that time. I went to Vietnam, of course, to talk to the ambassador there, (Elbridge) Durbrow, and I met with President Diem on that visit as on other visits. It was a time of great anxiety for the Vietnamese government and for President Diem. In Vietnam I talked less about the Lao situation. Their own troubles were sufficiently large on their immediate screen.

O'BRIEN: Did you discuss the blockade that was at that time being carried on by Thailand against Laos in an attempt to get that removed?

PARSONS: I don't remember the timing of the blockade, but I think this was probably just before we came out--Riley and Irwin and myself. But I'm not sure. I don't recall the timing of that episode.

O'BRIEN: We're, right at that point in the interview in which we're sort of reaching a transition period into the

new administration. Is there anything that we should have covered?

PARSONS: No, there was a tremendous flurry of activity right down to the wire, the wire being January 20th, twelve noon. And even on the very holidays immediately before that--New Year's Day, not inauguration day itself, I don't believe, but certainly the 19th of January--we were actively engaged in Laos' affairs. And at that time, the thing which we were all engaged in, as far as I can remember, was would the International Control Commission be reintroduced into Laos and if so, in what manner. The Canadians, (the Poles,) the Indians, who were members of the International Control Commission, everybody, in fact, had their own viewpoint on it; and there were a lot of complexities to finding a formula for this.

Incidentally, it was Souvanna Phouma himself who, at an earlier period, asked for the Commission to be withdrawn. It's been alleged by somebody--I don't know who, (Arthur M., Jr.) Schlesinger, someone or other of our fairly instant historians--that I was responsible for getting rid of the International Control Commission. This is not so. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this was Souvanna's idea. I think we agreed with it--or didn't oppose it at any rate.

He felt that with the formation of a coalition government at long last, which it had been my duty to oppose as ambassador in Laos under instructions from Walter Robertson and Mr. Dulles, now that the coalition government had been formed, there was no need any more for a control commission; the provisions of the Geneva Accords had at long length thus been satisfied; the Pathet Lao were reintegrated into the community. We soon found out how well they had been reintegrated--of course, I mean Souvanna found out soon; we had our suspicions. And, therefore, no need for the International Control Commission, which was sort of an impediment to full and obvious sovereignty for the country.

But at any rate, this was the issue at the turn of the year, plus the emergence of Soviet supply activities--planes flying over.

O'BRIEN: Well, at this point--somewhere along this point--you must have met President Kennedy and perhaps briefed him on Southeast Asia.

PARSONS: I never met President Kennedy until about the 21st or 22nd of January. I'd never even seen him. And on either one of those dates--I'm quite sure it was not later. I remember Dean Rusk--who was the brand new secretary,

whom I'd known before, not well, but I'd been an office director when he'd been assistant secretary for Far East in the (Harry S.) Truman administration, at the time of the Korean War, for instance (I was in the European side then)--Dean Rusk called up and said that he wanted me to go with him to the White House, and they were going to discuss Vietnam. The president was, as you can see, almost from the moment he came into office, caught up with the problems of Vietnam and Laos and attacked them with the well-known vigor and dynamism and so on.

So I found myself over there in a large meeting. I suppose it was sort of an expanded National Security Council meeting. I remember seeing the vice president there, Mr. (Lyndon B.) Johnson, and Secretary (Robert S.) McNamara for the first time, and Allen Dulles was there, and I think people from the Joint Chiefs. And Vietnam was the subject.

I had told the secretary just before the meeting that we had received only two or three days before from the embassy in Saigon, a very large document, maybe an inch or two thick, that they'd been working on for a long time under our encouragement and instruction; the purport of which was, regardless of its title, a counterinsurgency program for Vietnam. And the thesis was that perhaps we'd been preparing for the wrong kind of threat; that there'd been too much formalized conventional military training; that there wasn't likely to be a massive attack across frontiers, but, as was already evident, terrorization and small actions, using jungle bases and all that sort of things--trying to disrupt the country along the ways we all know.

So I told the secretary that this had just come in a couple of days before, and he said, "Bring it along and present it to the president." So I found myself trying to brief this august assemblage on a very complex document that had just come in. But no matter how inadequately I portrayed it, it was obvious that the president and others present were very much interested in this approach which had been started under the previous administration purely at the level of the department and the embassy, as I recall, although I'm sure the whole country team participated in Saigon. And this may have been one of the influences which caused the president to take so much of an interest in counterinsurgency as a problem.

O'BRIEN: Was General (E. G.) Lansdale at that meeting, do you recall?

PARSONS: I'm almost certain that he was. Why did you ask me that question?

O'BRIEN: Well, I was going to, a little while later, go over a list here with you of things out of the White House appointments, and I just notice that the Lansdale name was on it. . . . Somewhere in the back of my mind--a number of things, Lansdale's counterinsurgency. . . .

PARSONS: Well, I think that was a key reason why he was present if, as I believe, he was. He is very able and intelligent man with lots of original ideas and lots of ideas that were well attuned to the situation on the ground.

But I remember--and I think this is an interesting little bit of history--that I discovered that an officer who was well known, throughtout Southeast Asia as a very successful and prominent CIA agent was going to be made ambassador to South Vietnam, at that point. Some days later in the department, I asked the secretary if he was aware of this and if he realized the implications of having a prominent CIA agent being given this position of prominence and great responsibility in a critical area of the Far East. Was this the kind of image--was it likely to produce the kind of image which the president and he would want? Because it would come out almost immediately that this man had performed very valuable services, but nevertheless, services which involved CIA activity. I might say that the atmosphere as regards the CIA wasn't as--well, the flashpoint wasn't as close then as it is now, when you remember what's happened in the last year or two.

At any rate, this was no criticism of the officer involved, a very able man who had a record of success in meeting difficult situations in a novel way, celebrated in The Ugly American, actually--that horrible book. But the secretary said that he did see the implications, and he seemed rather startled by them. He said, "It may be quite difficult," and he said, "I want to think this over and we'll see." Well, in the end this officer was not sent to Vietnam. Instead of that (Frederick E.) Fritz Nolting was sent as ambassador.

O'BRIEN: Would you mind naming that officer? Were you speaking of Lansdale?

PARSONS: Yeah.

O'BRIEN: That brings up another interesting point, which, incidentally, goes back--and it's not The Ugly American which is the source of this, really. It's my understanding that there was a good deal of CIA activity involved in the political groups in Southeast Asia during these years. For example, as I understand it, some Chinese political parties in Singapore as well as in some anti-Sihanouk groups--at least,

some contact between them. Would you care to reflect on this and what it means to someone, like yourself, who's officially charged with carrying out foreign policy?

PARSONS: Well, I'd like to pass over it (CIA activity) rather lightly because in the first place this antedates the Kennedy administration. Although, I don't know about the Singapore thing--that may have been during the Kennedy administration, the allegations, the merits of which I don't know; I was in Sweden at that time--but I do know the effect on Lee Kuan Yew, whom I had met and had been enormously impressed with, particularly as a person who is a wave of the future. He is a nationalist leader, very able, a free Chinese leader of his community.

But as regards Cambodia, I always felt that the situation there had been distorted; that the reactions which had resulted in Cambodia were exaggerated; and that it could very possibly have been cleared up quite easily. And I had wanted to do so in relation to one particular incident of no importance in itself, but this never proved to be possible, and I think we paid a larger price than we should have paid or needed to pay. But I don't think I ought to go very much further into this--that far back.

O'BRIEN: In your contacts--maybe I should put it this way. Did you have any contacts with incoming administration officials before the actual inauguration or formal briefing--people in the White House or some of the new appointments in the State Department?

PARSONS: Very limited, very limited. The turnover, of course, is always extremely difficult, and I'd remembered it as such when I was at the office level when the Truman administration turned over to the Eisenhower administration. And I remember it from this period as being difficult.

For months the Eisenhower administration had been careful to try to avoid any decisions which were not absolutely necessary in the foreign field and which might burden or commit the successor generation. I think President Eisenhower followed a very fine policy in this respect, despite how greatly it handicapped the people who had to deal with affairs in those last few months.

The assistant secretary level is really not high enough to be able to speak authoritatively on this, but the Kennedy administration, from where I sat at that level, seemed to me also careful not to involve itself (before inauguration) in any formal meetings or any official meetings or overt meetings which might tend to compromise its freedom of action after it came in or which might

give it a partial responsibility for things on which it had, yet, no authority. So I thought that the arrangements were minimal, and that this is one of the difficult constitutional and procedural things we have in our form of government. We've got to do better on this in the future than we have up to the present.

I had one long meeting--it lasted all day--on Sunday before the inauguration with George McGhee, who was then Secretary Rusk's advance man, in a room down on the bottom floor of the State Department where the new people were reading-in, so to speak, for several weeks. We did our best with papers prepared for the new group, for them to read and lots of other things--all that side was fine. But there wasn't very much consultation and no participation before the actual turnover.

This long meeting with George McGhee was to go through the Lao situation, in particular, "from a to izzard", and the Vietnamese situation, too, I think. But I'm a little hazy on that. But at any rate, I remember we were there all day trying to disgorge as much current information and background information as we could for the benefit of George and for the new administration and secretary. But that was about the only contact that I had.

Of course we all know from what has been published that the president did have--President Eisenhower and President Kennedy met and that Herter and Rusk met and so on. At a higher level, there were very useful meetings.

O'BRIEN: I have a list of White House appointments here, just some of the meetings of the groups--particularly, groups that you were involved in at the time you were assistant secretary there and were involved with Laos. And I thought I would ask you to reflect back over some of those and anything you recall would be very useful. And I think. . . .

PARSONS: Well, the first meeting, January 28th, I'm quite sure must be the one which I described earlier. But this is not a complete list. If it was that meeting, it was a bigger group than that. I specifically remember the vice president, I'm quite sure. He's present at virtually all of these meetings.

O'BRIEN: We've found that that's not a complete list in any way. It's just the thing that (P. Kenneth) Kenny O'Donnell had, apparently, while he was appointments secretary.

PARSONS: Yes. Well, I think this is the meeting which I described on Vietnam. And, particularly, with Ed Lansdale

present, I'm sure that this must have been it. My recollection was that it was only a day or two after inauguration, but I see it's a whole week.

The February 8th meeting, I'm quite sure was a meeting on Laos, which included, among other things, the question of what might be done about the Soviet supply flights that were taking place over Laos and whether any counteraction was called for in regard to this.

I won't name who the military briefing officer was. I think, actually, there was more than one at different times. But the officer who did discuss this situation remarked on the possibility of single engine trainer planes, which were available in the neighborhood and could possibly be flown by Lao, being a useful countermeasure and so on. And it turned out that there was not the expertise at this meeting to really give an accurate picture of what the capabilities of this plane was. The plane was not as fast as the Soviet plane, and it was a plane of very limited capabilities.

And I've always wondered in my own mind whether that briefing and the portrayal which was given there, too, of General Phoumi Nosavan's capabilities against Kong Le and the Communists, with whom he (Kong Le) was more or less making common cause as of that time, if a rather unrealistic portrayal of his (Phoumi's) capabilities hadn't had some influence on the president's attitude towards the Joint Chiefs as an institution early on in this administration. I don't know. But this is something that came into my mind when later on I read allegations that the president was much more skeptical or careful about accepting judgments of the JCS.

O'BRIEN: Did you feel that they gave a fair evaluation of Phoumi?

PARSONS: My memory is a little too hazy to give a clear and frank answer to that. My feeling was, though, that there weren't enough hedge clauses on the things that go wrong in Laos and have traditionally gone wrong: that for some reason they (the Lao) won't be able to move until tomorrow or the day after tomorrow and when they do, there won't be as many of them or they won't be quite as energetic as had been anticipated. But again, it's hard to transfer the American frame of reference for military people into the Lao frame of reference. And some of these people who were talking were fairly new to dealing with the Lao and thought that maybe they could do things which some of the rest of us didn't really have too much optimism about.

The luncheon of February 24 was very interesting to me in that the

president so early in his administration--right away, at the beginning--had small working lunches for prominent foreign visitors. In this case, Prime Minister (Robert Gordon) Menzies was coming through on his way to or from the UK (United Kingdom), and the guest list was just as you have it here: Menzies; the president; Howard Beale, the Australian ambassador; Dean Rusk; and myself--just five people. And completely informal, completely relaxed and, really, a most memorable and engaging occasion. Two of the greatest spellbinders that I had ever encountered were the principals. Menzies is just a fascinating figure and a man of immense stature--he would have been in any country, let alone Australia--and a very colorful and persuasive talker and relator of anecdotes.

And, of course, the president--one can say whatever one likes, but I personally found him a most engaging, delightful, and impressive conversationalist; a man of great humor, great presence, great wit--all the things that you read about him but. . . . I'm just trying to create the impression that the impact of his personality on me was very great, as it was on most people in intimate contact like that.

The president and Menzies chatted a great deal about World War II and about the PT boat incident, and it turned out that Menzies was able to indentify for the president who the person was, the coast watcher off the Solomon Islands who had seen this episode and had over his clandestine radio been able to call for help, which ultimately led to the rescue of Lieutenant Kennedy and his crew. I guess he was a lieutenant at that time. And you could see that the president was just fascinated by this, and he and Menzies enjoyed talking over the whole complex of circumstances relating to those days. Of course there was business discussed, too.

And I think it was at that luncheon, although I went to several others (I see you've got some more listed here), that the president asked me, "What do you think was the most important thing that we did wrong in Laos over the past few years?" A question which I hadn't expected, particularly in august company. And I told him that I thought that we had for a brief time, some years before, abandoned, for the moment, our really great discretion of not doing anything which was too provocative to the other side. For instance, (as ambassador to Laos) I briefed General (Lyman L.) Lemnitzer in Saigon, (not Vientiane) when he came out. And Allen Dulles, I asked him not to come up to Laos. I went down to Bangkok to see him and all that sort of thing. We were extremely careful. I mean, we were well aware of these considerations, of not being unnecessarily provocative.

But at the time of an election, which in the field some of our zealous and highly motivated patroitic people called operation something or other (Booster Shot) the sky was raining supplies for the benefit of the conservative candidates in the election. And the American hand was far too prominent in this. I didn't think that we had exercised much prudence or conservatism in our desire to support the non-communist side then, and that it was counterproductive. And so it happened, because it wasn't terribly long after that, that the communist counteroffensive in Laos began. The election was notoriously corrupt. We didn't have a part in the corruption, but we were interested, of course, in dropping food to the people; and the people who benefitted from this largesse, of course, were the conservative candidates who had powerful friends, namely, the United States.

But I hit on this (at the lunch) as being probably the most serious error that had been made at a rather important time when we were doing--the Laos government was doing really rather well and Laos was doing quite well, and it appeared as though the policy which we had followed was succeeding. Excesses like these are very difficult to control when you get people who're told to do a job and they go gung ho doing it. After all, Americans are a dynamic and energetic people, and rightly so; I'm glad they are. But there're times when it doesn't help. Well, that's just a little digression.

I can't tell you what other specific subjects were discussed. There wasn't a great deal of Australian-American business of importance, but this was a get-acquainted luncheon and a highly successful one.

There was another luncheon like that for Prime Minister (Keith J.) Holyoake of New Zealand soon afterwards. All these other occasions on which I was present with people at Cabinet, National Security Council level, JCS level, senior CIA people, and others, they're almost entirely on Laos, but I couldn't tell you what particular aspect at this date. I don't have any documents which would refresh my memory and, of course, I haven't had a chance to try to dig into the archives in preparation for this. So I really can't say as to. . . . I don't even remember on March 23 when Secretary Rusk and I went to see president alone, apparently, what the particular purpose of that was. But it was probably either Laos or Vietnam.

O'BRIEN: Well, in an overall sense or, specifically, do you recall any real points of policy towards Laos that were changed between the time of the Eisenhower administration--perhaps in the last days there that you were

involved in the Laotian situation--and the Kennedy administration?

PARSONS: Up to the time I left, I don't remember feeling that there was any really significant change in our policy. The president inherited an extremely difficult situation from his predecessors. He became deeply engaged in it almost at once. I suspect his feeling was that somehow or other things that have gone awry like this hadn't been as well handled as they should be. He never said so. And one of the things that I greatly admired about the president was that he never blamed the predecessors for the mess he'd inherited. He was very fair about this.

I didn't feel that there was a significant change before I left and, of course, I knew I was going. I was a lame duck assistant secretary, and although Dean Rusk said to me as he did to the other assistant secretaries whom he inherited, "I want you to know that the administration has full confidence in you; that you are to continue to act as though you were our appointee and were staying indefinitely," the fact is, after three years in my case, a little over three years in Washington, it was time to go, and they would want to have their own man, naturally.

But the only hint of. . . . Well there were two hints of impending policy changes before I left. One was at one of these occasions, here, a very useful occasion from my point of view in my new job as ambassador to Sweden, the luncheon in honor of the prime minister of Sweden, Mr. (Tage F.) Erlander, which is the first time I had met Mr. Erlander. And it was a very nice stirrup cup, a leg-up for my new job and very thoughtful of the president to include me because I hadn't taken up the job or taken the oath of office; I was still assistant secretary at that stage. During the luncheon, which, although ladies were present, was both an informal occasion, pleasant occasion, and also a working lunch. . . . Rather toward the end of lunch, Erlander said, "Well, I come from a small country with very few problems, and we have no great issues with you, Mr. President, between the United States and Sweden, but you have great problems all over the world. Would you like to talk about some of them for my benefit? If you don't, I will understand."

And I was sitting about two or three places from the president and he leaned forward just a little bit, and I saw a broad smile come across his face, and he said, "Well, Mr. Prime Minister, of course there is Laos, Laos is a great problem." Then he said, "Perhaps I shouldn't talk about Laos because the greatest expert on Laos in our government is sitting just two, three places down from me, and I ought to be pretty careful," some such quip as that. And then he said--and he said it in a way that was not in the least embarrassing to me and which brought a general laugh around the table--he said,

"You know, he is our great expert on Laos, and perhaps it's for that reason that I'm sending him to you as ambassador to Sweden." (Laughter)

However, he put it, it was put very gracefully and not in any way embarrassing to me as an undercut or anything. It wasn't so intended, and it didn't have that effect, and it was just one of the rather pleasant anecdotes about the president that I remember. Have I followed the lead that you asked me about? I can't remember.

O'BRIEN: Yes, very much so. I was wondering. You have a number of things there that you said that you'd like to go into. Have you covered them or . . .

PARSONS: Some, I have. This meeting here in the White House, "The following ambassadors called on the president before departing for their posts on March 25," was rather interesting because of one thing which the president said. I won't identify the country about which he said it. But the eight ambassadors who were there to say good-bye to him--one, (William McCormick, Jr.) Bill Blair, of course, was close to the Kennedys, but the others, with the possible exception of myself, hadn't really had much contact with him. And he said, "Now, I want you ambassadors to be active at your posts, and I don't just mean in the capital city." And he said, "I've got a clipping here from the New York Times and it said, 'The American embassy here is not terribly well regarded. They all seem to stay in the embassy and not get out into the countryside or to meet all types of people.'" And the president said, "Now, I hope that no such thing is going to be written about anyone of you men here, present today. Remember you're ambassador to the country, to the whole country (in my case ambassador to Sweden and not just ambassador to Stockholm). And while your business is with the government on our behalf, do travel in the country. Don't get desk-bound,"and so on. I thought this was an interesting exposition of attitude. Then he had this clipping right in his hand. The clipping was maybe a week to ten days old. He'd evidently saved it for this purpose.

O'BRIEN: Did you have something out of your papers that you wanted to go into here?

PARSONS: Yes I do. But before I do that--actually, I did have this in my notes, too. I never felt any sense of friction or criticism in regard to the president's attitude towards the Foreign Service. I know it's often been said that the president was not very favorably impressed with

the Service, had his reservations and so on. I don't know whether this is true or not, but certainly he dealt with the Foreign Service officers that he came across in those early days just as he would with anybody else. There was never any sense, that I felt, of lack of confidence or lack of willingness to work with them. And, certainly, the immediate impression which he made on the department and on individuals, including myself, was one of--well, it was almost an electrifying reaction. The atmosphere changed completely.

I'd mentioned that it was difficult in the dying months of the Eisenhower administration to reach decisions, albeit for good and proper reasons. But the contrast between grinding to a halt there on the evening of January 19th in that terrific snow storm and starting up again and afresh on January 20 was one which I will never forget. And I think the president immediately had captured the imagination and the respect of all the career people in the Service, and they were all impressed with his personal involvement.

The change of style, of course, was very striking. I mean, instead of working on a more formalized staff basis, the changeover to the president's personal involvement, even to the point of picking up the telephone and calling officers of no great prominence for something that he wanted to know and wanted to know then--all this was exciting and interesting. And the fact that he came over in the early days and sat at the end of the table at Secretary Rusk's staff meeting and took the meeting, in effect--this was great. It was inspiring and made you have a sense of for whom you were working.

A lot of people in government work at fairly high levels without ever seeing the president. The State Department may be a partial exception to this. At any rate, there were people who attended the Secretary's staff meeting who wouldn't get to see the president for quite a while, but they did that morning, and they had a very positive impression. This was a very exciting thing. Whatever the president did think of the State Department and the Foreign Service, certainly the people I knew around the department, and this goes for the Foreign Service particularly, responded to him and responded immediately.

Looking at my notes here, what. . . . I think we've covered most of the things that have to do with my Far Eastern experience. Although, there was another change, of method more than of style. As soon as the president came in, he went to task forces. Crisis management had this difference in organization right from the beginning. Earlier on, in the Eisenhower administration, when there was a crisis, if it was handled or if there were meetings at the

department level, you brought together the key people who were involved, and usually the geographic bureau assistant secretary remained seized of the problem and one of his deputies handled most of the other business. But he did so in his capacity as assistant secretary for thus and such.

Very early on, the Kennedy administration organized task forces for particular problems, for Laos, say, or Vietnam. I think I chaired both of these for a while, until I began phasing out. And there were White House representatives present, Walt Rostow. I guess he started off in the--I can't remember whether he started in the department or in the White House. But at any rate. . . .

O'BRIEN: I think he started in the White House and then . . .

PARSONS: Started in the White House and then he moved over and then he went back under Mr. Johnson when (McGeorge) Mac Bundy left. Well, Walt Rostow used to come. Or if he wasn't there, somebody else who could go back and report immediately to the president if he wanted to hear what had gone on. So there was this type of liaison even at the task force level in the department. There wasn't anything particularly novel in these meetings which you've listed here. I mean, the secretary would take with him his senior advisor for Far East or for Europe or for whatever it was. This had been done before, too.

But the task force, the emphasis on task force for decision-making and divorcing it from the line office, from the assistant secretary and his assistants who were seized with all the problems of their area, that was a change of technique just as the technique of small working lunches with Menzies and Holyoake and so on was, so far as I know, unique. Well, at any rate, I don't remember hearing of any such during President Eisenhower's time. I think that's about all on my Far Eastern Bureau days (in the Kennedy administration).

O'BRIEN: Well, we're just about ready to run out of tape on this side, and I would like to go into the ambassadorship.

PARSONS: That won't take very long.

O'BRIEN: Well, you know better than I. I'm trying to find some major political issues between the U.S. and Sweden and they're just not very. . . .

PARSONS: I don't think there are any burning issues, particularly, at the time of Kennedy. . . .

BEGIN SIDE I, TAPE II

O'BRIEN: Yes, we were talking about President Kennedy and the visit of President Erlander of Sweden--or is it prime minister?

PARSONS: Prime minister, yes.

O'BRIEN: Would you care to. . . .

PARSONS: Yes, you mentioned as you were fixing the machine there about how the president was briefed on the visit of foreign dignitaries and so on. I don't know how it was done in the case of Prime Minister Erlander before the luncheon and visit, which we'll talk about in a moment, but I remember very well what occurred before he had Mr. Menzies and Mr. Holyoake for lunch. I think there were one or two others I attended, too. He would send for the assistant secretary involved--at least he sent for me in the case of both of these lunches--and he'd wait until he was ready, usually just immediately before the lunch. And he'd call you into the office--nobody else there--and he'd say, "Now, I have met so and so before." Or, "I have not met so and so before. I don't know much about him. Tell me what he's like. Tell me what the problems are between us at this time. Do you know what he's going to take up?"

Of course we would have provided the usual written briefing beforehand, anyway. I've forgotten how long he liked it, but it was undoubtedly short and formal. But in about ten minutes of just give and take he had a chance to follow up with you anything in particular that was on his mind or to ask you about aspects of the country's problems or our relationships which he ought to have in mind, and he gave you an opportunity to say if you recommended that he help with a particular problem. Then, if what you had to say made sense to him, he might very well pick it up during the lunch. So this was one way in which he prepared for occasions such as this.

He certainly did it for Menzies and Holyoake. And the day that he did it for Holyoake was after he had nominated me as ambassador to Sweden, and I remember he was running behind schedule and kept me waiting. All of a sudden, the door opened and there was the president with (William David) Ormsby Gore, the British ambassador, a very old friend of his. He said to Ormsby Gore, "I want you to meet the ambassador." And he said, "This is Ambassador Parsons. He's going to the best post in the Foreign Service--Sweden." And Ormsby Gore laughed and said I was a lucky fellow and congratulated me and so on. Well, I didn't know at that time, but I found out

later in Sweden, that the president had visited there, I think before he entered the Congress, and had a very happy visit and come away with a glowing impression of what a nice, hospitable people and beautiful country and so on. So this explained the sincerity and the enthusiasm in this rather engaging remark. Then, I went in and talked to him about his guest for lunch, Holyoake.

But the period I was in Sweden--it began extremely well because of the Erlander visit. What greater advantage can you have than to be introduced to the prime minister by the president himself? And this was never forgotten and was a very useful and thoughtful thing on the part of the president to have done. Whether this was general practice or not, or it just happened to be an opportunity which he or someone in the White House thought of I don't know.

But his attitude towards the Prime Minister and Mrs. Erlander was a very relaxed and easy one. Erlander had nine first cousins in the United States. He was instinctively an admirer and friend of the United States--and Swedish politics aside--including these later days when various difficulties have arisen which have caused Swedish reactions, Swedish domestic political reactions.

But the luncheon meeting had one very useful, practical aftermath for the conduct of our affairs with Sweden and, to an extent, for the handling of certain domestic affairs in the United States. After lunch--it was a lovely day--the president and the prime minister went out alone together and walked a bit in the garden and they had sat in the study too--I don't know how long, but we waited quite a while. And I've always understood that it was on that occasion that they discussed a return visit to Sweden by a Cabinet member rather than by the president, who couldn't see his way to travel for quite a long while and didn't then know where he would travel when he did. He sent Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg to Stockholm.

And of course the Swedes are way advanced in techniques of labor-management relations, manpower policy, labor mobility, relocation, labor retraining, the part of women in the productive economy of the country, and how to utilized handicapped people, various aspects of social security and also of anti-cyclical, in other words, anti-inflation, unemployment problems, and their employment service is very advanced. Well, the view was that Arthur Goldberg should go to Sweden as a follow up for Erlander's talks with the president in Washington, and I was very interested in this, too.

I encouraged this as one of the rather limited number of positive things that could be done between the United States and Sweden--

we just have nice, uneventful relationships most of the time; no major problems between us then, whatever the situation may be right now. I encouraged the idea of American officials coming to Sweden and learning on the spot what the Swedish ideas and techniques were so that they could go back to the States and against the background of that knowledge, see which of these ideas might be useful or adapted in some way to our own domestic scene, and this was very much in the mind of senior people in the Labor Department at that time, and of our labor attaché in Stockholm, too.

But the upshot of this was that it did lead to some useful exchanges. We had a senior Swedish official from there--I forget the name, now, whether it was the Manpower Utilization Board or some such thing--in the Labor Department for six months, and we had a number of highly qualified Americans come and sit in the Swedish administration in various places--the employment service or whatever. When there weren't too many positive things between the Swedes and ourselves, this was very useful, and it also helped me as ambassador to have entré to other parts of the Swedish government than just the traditional foreign ministry.

But Arthur Goldberg's visit, in particular, was also extremely useful because it occurred in September of '61, which is just when Swedish officials come back from their summer holidays. Summer holidays are taken rather seriously in Europe and nowhere more so than in Sweden. And the prime minister invited most of his Cabinet and a number of the other key citizens of the establishment, all parts of the establishment, down to his country estate at Harpsund to meet Mr. Goldberg, and he included me. So very soon in my mission I met all the key people in the Swedish government and under just about as favorable auspices as one could hope for. And this was a further consequence and aftermath of the president's luncheon, you see, at which I met Erlander in the first instance. So it was very helpful.

O'BRIEN: You had another important visitor, President Eisenhower, as I understand, in '61.

PARSONS: Yes, I did; (Eisenhower in '62 or '63) I did, that was a very happy and very relaxed visit. When he wrote me that he was coming, he said he hoped it would be convenient and so on. So I wrote him back and said, "It's entirely convenient and I'm delighted, but you should know that the Swedes have not forgotten and have used in their domestic political life statements attributed to you in the 1956 campaign referring to a certain fairly friendly, neutral country where socialism, sin and sex, or whatever the phrase was, were rampant and greater suicide rate than anyplace else and so on." I said, "They thought the shoe fitted in Sweden, or at least they always thought you were talking about Sweden. And this has

been exploited unfavorably, so you ought to know about it because you'll hear something about it when you come here."

So the president came and he arrived with Mrs. Eisenhower and the two grandchildren, Julie Nixon's husband now, David, and--I forget the girl's name--a very nice youngster. And they got off the train and reporters were there, and there was going to be a press conference. Before there could be a single question, President Eisenhower said; "Now, I want to start right out and tell you people something. It's been on my mind for quite a long time. During the campaign in 1956 I was quoted as saying thus and so. I don't remember exactly what I said, but at any rate, I was misinformed and I was wrong. I just feel sorry about it and when I've done something which is unjust to someone, to a lot of someones, I want to make amends for it and I'm sorry and I know better now." The whole place was his from then on. It was just terrific.

But he came as a private citizen, and while he and Erlander had a good chat--I have a very nice picture of it--there was no official business. He was taking the grandchildren on a trip through Europe, and he and Mrs. Eisenhower were just delightful visitors, and I think they had a very pleasant time. They didn't want to have official engagements, but they did come to a buffet lunch at the embassy and were very pleasant guests and gave a great deal of pleasure to the Swedes who also came.

As I say, there were very few positive elements in our relationships, but we did have some occasional difficult questions. And one of them I started wrestling with as soon as I arrived in Sweden. That story may have some interest for people who are concerned with the development of the Common Market (European Economic Community), European integration, and the attitude of the United States and the policy towards that problem at that time.

Under the leadership of the under secretary, George Ball, we had a fairly aggressive and dynamic policy supporting in every possible way the progress of European federalism and integration leading towards eventual unity and so on. And it so happened that at that time, the Swedes had either applied or were about to apply for association with the Common Market, but asking for special exemptions and special provisions because of their political neutrality. They didn't feel that they could ever become full members.

Our policy was that if the association of a country was with eventual full membership in mind, or if it involved discriminatory or unfavorable trade relations for us for the time being but would in the end be helpful to the larger cause of political unity in Europe, then we could accept, encourage and support this. But if it was purely for the purpose of seeking trade advantage while going, apparently,

counter to the idea of political integration in Europe, then this wasn't in accord with our hopes, and our policy was to make this quite clear.

And I remember on the occasion of my initial visit to a senior Swedish diplomat in the foreign ministry, a rather spontaneous gentlemen, I gave him an aide-memoire, which was verbatim what had been sent to me from the department, as instructed. And his immediate verbal rejoinder was, "But the policy of your government is outrageous." He used the adjective outrageous in sedate Sweden. I thought this quite an introduction to one of the people with whom I'd be working with, and quite apart from its indication of a minor confrontation of policy in this field, it turned out to be a rather useful thing for me because for the next several years, whenever he had a point of view with which I didn't agree, I managed to slip in the adjective outrageous every now and again. And he knew perfectly well that he'd gone too far with a perfect stranger, the new ambassador from the United States. So that was to me quite an amusing episode.

At any rate, the epilogue to this incident is that long about Christmas that year, after we had spent months trying to be of assistance and carry out our instructions from the department in this field and in the process showing that we knew pretty well what the policy was and were doing our utmost to carry it out, a long towards Christmas time, I thought that it was warranted to put together our own reactions and ideas as seen from Sweden, just from our own limited vantage point. The Swedes were convinced that France was not ready for the Common Market to lead to supernationality, and the Swedes were convinced that all this would go much more slowly and that it could not be induced effectively from the outside. Well, we thought this was something--which, of course, we had already reported to the department--but which we could use as a springboard for raising in think-piece terms whether there were any alternatives to this particular technique that we were following or the particular tactics. In other words, were there some other ways to which we could get to the same goal, or were there fallback positions prepared in case we didn't get instant union in Europe.

I thought the piece which my staff and I prepared wasn't too bad, and I felt we put the proper hedge clauses in to show that it was a think-piece and also as seen just from where we sat. And no ambassador sees more than, of course, his segment of the whole bird's-eye view.

But about two or three days later--it was late in December by the way--I got a telegram back, which was repeated for information to all

the Common Market country capitals through our embassies, all the EFTA (European Free Trade Association) country capitals, plus all the other big capitals. And it began something along the lines, "It is obvious from Stockholm's number so and so that the embassy does not understand the policy of the United States," and then it proceeded to take me apart in very critical fashion. I forget whether the secretary was present, but it was signed either by him or by Ball as acting secretary. And I'd never seen a telegram like this to an ambassador. I've written lots of telegrams in my life differing with ambassadors in the field when I've been a departmental official, and I've seen. . . . It wasn't a call-down, it was just, "You stupid guys out there, you just don't understand, and you better get with it."

So I receive this, and I sent a telegram back the next day--and repeated it to all the other capitals all over Europe. And all it said was, "Merry Christmas, anyhow." To this day, ten years after the date, people who were in those other capitals are telling me that they enjoyed this little interchange enormously and thought that I'd given the only answer that seemed useful under the circumstances. (Laughter)

One of the fellows who had to do with that telegram, which was not signed out at a very high level in the department, has since told me they deplored the doctrinaire quality of the response I got. But this was the kind of thing that could happen fairly early in the administration on policy in which people felt very deeply engaged and felt very strongly. And it's the opposite from what I think to be sound technique in a foreign ministry.

You ought to welcome ideas from the field, and you ought to remember all points of view and also have alternatives and fall-back positions in case you aren't going to win. And it was getting pretty obvious then that things weren't going to turn out according to plan.

O'BRIEN: You have one problem there in which, I believe, it was a member of the Swedish military was caught spying and there was some question whether U.S. defense secrets were involved, or intelligence secrets were involved. Wennerstrom, Colonel Stig Wennerstrom?

PARSONS: Yes, Yes. This was, for a brief time, a very traumatic experience for the Swedes, and particularly for the Swedish military, because by definition almost and by custom from time immemorial, it's impossible to conceive of a Swedish military officer being disloyal to his country. I must say it is rather difficult for me to conceive of this too. But

Wennerstrom, who had been at lunch at our embassy a week before--he was very widely received. One of my key officers, the head of the political section, used to have liaison meetings with him quite frequently to discuss the Swedish attitude on United Nations matters--that was his responsibility in the foreign ministry at that time--and to give him previews of our attitudes. So one of our officers was in regular contact with him in matters of some importance.

Well, when this incident broke, of course there was enormous scurrying around within the Swedish government, within our government, within other governments concerned, as to what had the contacts been with Wennerstrom over the past fifteen years; what would he likely have seen, and so forth and so on. And this was a domestic matter for us; to try to assess what the damage had been and to draw from it whatever conclusions and recommendations we needed to draw. The Swedish government's problem was very much more difficult. His own country was compromised in a much more serious way than anyone else. But this was not a problem, really between us and the Swedes. You could say that it had an effect on Sweden's reputation in the United States, and it didn't reflect credit on the Swedes. And they were well aware of that and very sensitive to it. They wanted to do the best they could to minimize the damage to anyone, beginning with themselves.

O'BRIEN: Does the embassy in Stockholm and the U.S. delegation there have any kind of special role in U.S.-Russian relations, either through contact or intelligence?

PARSONS: No, I wouldn't say anymore than one would expect. I mean our relationships with third countries are always of interest to an embassy--whatever the neighborhood. The fact that one of the neighbors happens to be the USSR makes the interest correspondingly greater because Sweden, of course, is preoccupied by its proximity to the Soviet Union. It's very close to one of the super powers. But I wouldn't say that this was any unusual part of my business or that it led to any special relationships, least of all with the Swedish government, at the embassy. But it certainly was something we all had in mind, and we never had it more in mind than during the Cuban crisis, which was a very, very tense time for the Swedes too.

O'BRIEN: Did you receive any special instructions during the Cuban missile crisis as to contacting officials in the Swedish government?

PARSONS: Nothing that I could call special. I mean, I received relatively little information during the progress of the crisis. It wasn't the sort of thing that could be disseminated widely to ambassadors in the field unless there was some positive role for them to fulfill. And in this case, there wasn't.; I don't remember anything particularly in this regard. I had briefing messages when it was possible to send briefing messages.

And I remember the resolution of the cirsis. Swedish time, it was a Sunday afternoon, October 28th, and I remember the date because it was my birthday. And we were out in the country with the senior civil servant in the Swedish foreign ministry, the number two man, by the name of Leif Belfrage. I got a call from the embassy in Stockholm--an hour's drive away--and, of course, any time the telephone rang those days you were nervous about it, but it was the final denouement and (Nikita S.) Khrushchev had turned back the ships, if that was the signal; I think it was. But at any rate, it was the time when the tension broke. And I'll never forget the effect on this ordinarily rather imperturbable and very self-contained Swede. I mean, the relief and the play of emotions that he went through was so obvious.

I mention this because very generally in Sweden, at the official level and elsewhere, the respect which the president earned for his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis was enormous and was a tremendous asset to us in our little sphere of Swedish-American bilateral relations. The president, from that time on, was regarded in Sweden as a tried and tested and extremely able and restrained leader. From the point of view of Swedish mentality and reactions, his handling of it, I think, suited very well, suited them very well, and there's no question but how their emotions were engaged in this.

At the time that he died, of course, this is one of the explanations for the tremendous reaction at all levels, at the offical level, too. I remember the very unusual lengths that the king himself (Gustav VI Adolf) went to. He called up withing a few minutes after the news on the telephone--this in itself is unusual, for a king to call a foreign ambassador on the phone personally. And the next day he came around to the embassy in person and stayed half an hour as a gesture of condolence and talking about now what the future held and so on.

There was nationwide mourning there--among the young, particularly. The youth out at the Stockholm University turned out in a torchlight parade. A few thousand of them came to the embassy in the snow on a Sunday, on an afternoon in November, late November, about three or four o'clock in the afternoon, pitch dark, and put

out their torches silently and went away. I remember saying in terms of the United States' image, which was so high in Sweden at that time, "The only way from this situation is down," and so it turned out. There was a euphoria, almost, about the Kennedy image there, there couldn't have been any other way than down after he was assassinated.

O'BRIEN: Sweden changed foreign ministers while you were there, from (Bo Osten) Unden to (Torsten) Nilsson. . . .

PARSONS: Yes, yes. Changed from a Mr. Unden, a university professor originally, by profession, but had been foreign minister for decades; very elderly man, honest, strong, straight in his views--some people would say inflexible. Legalistic, in my opinion. But he was very highly respected, and I must say I had to share the respect. A person of immense experience and immense knowledge and a ferocious guardian of the strict letter of Swedish neutrality and non-involvement. He wasn't the easiest person for a foreign ambassador to work with--at least, my predecessors and I didn't find him so.

And he was replaced by a Social Democratic man with a trade union background; blue collar background. He was a bricklayer; fought as a union leader to defeat the communists in Gothenburg and clean up infiltration of Swedish unions by subversive and militant communists; very straightforward, again. I found him an honest man with an engaging personality; most courteous; always willing to listen; and always felt an obligation to make the most useful reply that he could. From the time he came in, I thought there was opportunity for a real dialogue at the political level in the Foreign Ministry. I must say that before that, the only opportunities for such a dialogue were when I had the chance to talk to the prime minister, who was very receptive to occasional contacts with foreign ambassadors if they had something they really needed to see him about--very friendly.

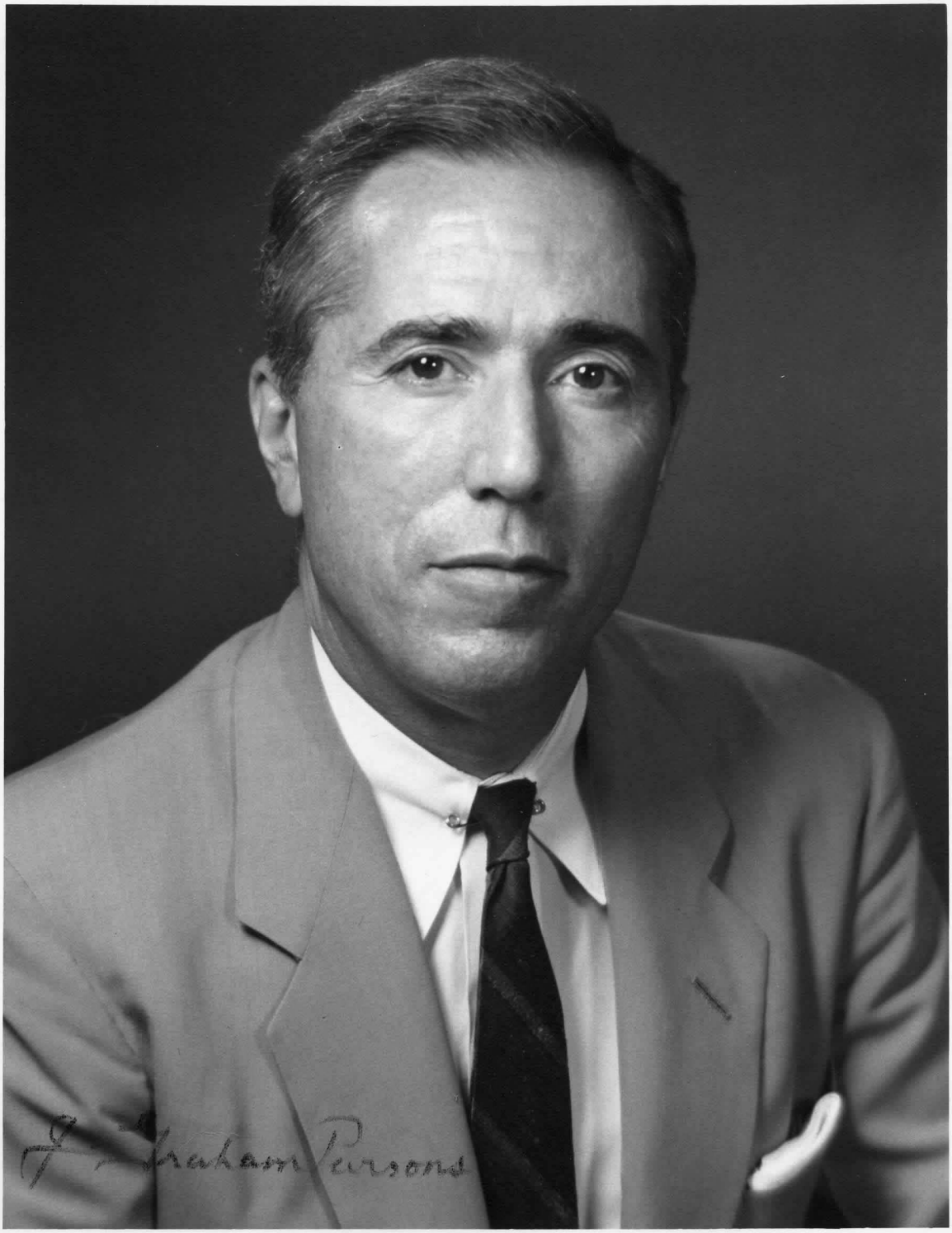
Nilsson came in, I think, after President Kennedy's assassination--I'm not sure. But at any rate, through that period when because of a number of circumstances, including the exploitation of the Vietnam war, there, by elements of the population for domestic political purposes, Nilsson was an extremely useful and understanding contact in terms of determining what Swedish reactions at the official level were and being as helpful as the proprieties would allow. I had great regard for Nilsson.

O'BRIEN: Just one parting question and please feel, you know, free to ignore this one if you wish. But. . . . This would go back to the Laotian crisis. Bernard Fall and Roger Hilsman

both were a little critical of your role. Do you care to respond to them--I say again, don't feel, you know, obligated to do so--or their books or their treatment of Laos or Southeast Asia?

PARSONS: I haven't read what Bernard Fall had to say about me or my time in Laos. I remember him as an experienced and competent scholar; very French in his viewpoints, perhaps partisan; but nevertheless, a respected figure, and I would have liked to have had the chance to debate with him and to have explained to him the reasons for some of the things that we did. I might not have been able to tell him of all the things that motivated us or caused us to do what we did do. But as I say, I haven't read his criticism, so I don't know whether they are the standard ones or not.

As far as Roger Hilsman is concerned, I just haven't taken his very seriously. The principal thing that I felt about that was that I was in pretty good company. He wrote in a rather uncharitable way about the man for whom he'd been working just a short time before, Dean Rusk, who carried some pretty heavy burdens and carried them devotedly and ably whatever one thinks of policies and all the rest of it. I just felt I was in very good company and it spoke for itself, the way he took off after the secretary so soon after he (Hilsman) left office. If he felt that way, I'm sorry he didn't leave office earlier.


J. Graham Parsons