

Michael V. Forrestal Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 7/28/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Michael V. Forrestal
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Biographical Note

Forrestal (1927 - 1989), Assistant to the President for Far Eastern Affairs (1962 - 1962); senior staff member, National Security Council (1962 - 1967), discusses the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Maphilindo problem and Malaysian/Indonesian tension, and the significance of Nam Tha, among other issues.

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Michael V. Forrestal – JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

Michael V. Forrestal

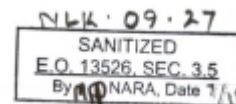
July 28, 1964

By Joseph Kraft

For the John F. Kennedy Library

KRAFT: The first thing I want to ask you about is the Cuban missiles crisis. Did you get into it, and what did you do?

FORRESTAL: Well, I didn't get into it until after the first bad five days had gone by. If I remember correctly, the President [John F. Kennedy] was told on Sunday of the first week of the Cuban crisis that aerial photography had shown or suggested the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, but I didn't know about this. The secret was closely held in the White House, I think pretty much with Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and possibly one or two others. And it wasn't until Friday following that Sunday night that Mac called Carl Kaysen, Komer [Robert W. Komer] and myself into his office and told us that the staff would have to be reorganized to deal with the crisis, which he then described for the first time to us. What the President had asked him to do was to divide the government and the White House staff into two parts; one part would try to carry on the regular business of government, and the other part would deal exclusively with this crisis. He suggested that Carl in effect take his place as the President's manager of national security affairs for the rest of the world. He sort of kidded Carl, saying that this was the greatest opportunity Carl would ever have, because there would be no chance of second-guessing or reviewing his opinion.



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He had asked Bob and myself and Dave Klein to become Cuban watch officers. Sort of set up a schedule so that there would always be somebody on tap who slept in the White House, who was available all day long or at all times to do whatever he or the President wanted to have done. So we did break it up in that way, and that's when I first heard about it.

Thereafter, we did set up this system, and that meant that every second or third day I would be on duty, as it were, and I got mixed up in a number of transactions which occurred; but always in intermittent basis - I never really had a substantive role to play. It was more being a sort of watch officer, a person on duty. I did get into some of the planning. An attempt was made (not really an attempt actually - I think it was really a part of the President's idea, and Mac's idea too) to keep a number of people working on collateral issues. I remember Paul Nitze [Paul Henry Nitze], for example, had a rather specific task in terms of analyzing the possibility of a Soviet reaction against Berlin. Some thought this was a "make-work" type of thing; but actually it really wasn't. The intention was really to try to do a job to figure out what might happen if the Russians chose to strike somewhere else. And I worked briefly with that task force.

KRAFT: Who was in that task force?

FORRESTAL: Well, it was Paul and a fellow called Captain Zumwalt [Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr.] (who was his Navy Captain, who is today, I think, his Aide, but he was then a military expert on Berlin matters). I think that Harry Rowen and

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Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] were also on that; and a few others on their staff - but it was basically Walt Rostow, Harry Rowen, Zumwalt.

KRAFT: Were you meeting in that group concurrently with the missiles crisis?

FORRESTAL: Yes. The way it worked out was that normally during the day instead of working on Far Eastern things, I would go to meetings of that particular group.

KRAFT: Can you describe the conclusions - hypotheses?

FORRESTAL: Not terribly well, because events overtook the work.

KRAFT: How about the transactions that took place while you were duty officer? And where was your duty, the Operations Room?

FORRESTAL: Yes, this was in the Situation Room mainly, in the White House. There I really only have two very strong recollections about that. The first one was (I've forgotten the day of the week, I think it was late in that week – probably Thursday or Friday night) about 9:30 at night. The duty officer on this particular occasion was a Naval Lt. Commander-the Situation Room duty officer (where I was sitting) handed me a yellow telegram (a wire copy). It was only about five lines long, and it was almost unintelligible. It read something like this: "Status zebra has been ordered. All units have assembled to cobra area. Sixteen circuits have been activated. " - something like that. End of the message. And the Lt. Commander came and he said, "Mr. Forrestal, I think the President should know that

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this has been done." I read the message and said, "Why, Commander? This doesn't mean anything to me at all." He said, "Well, it's a very complicated thing, but it's quite an important thing. We've never done this before." I said, "Done what?" And he said, "Well, assemble all units in area cobra and activate these various circuits." I said, "Well, what does that mean?" and he said, "It means a great deal if you were the Russians and you were listening to what we were doing in this country with your electronic ears. It would be a very disturbing thing. It means that aircraft have been sent certain places, that certain steps have been taken which require a very high degree of message activity - far higher than is normal. If they had done this, we would be very, very concerned; so I think you ought to tell the President." Well, that was enough. This was a very smart young Lt. Commander.

KRAFT: But didn't the President know this was going to be done?

FORRESTAL: Well, I wasn't sure. I didn't know whether he knew it all I knew was that this thing had come in. So I took the message and went up stairs. It was about 9:30 or 10 o'clock at night; and I found the President up in his study - a little room next to his bedroom. He was reading papers. I knocked on the door and walked in. He looked up and said hello, then asked what I had. I showed him the telegram, and he looked at me for a moment and said, "What do you think this is all about?" I said, "Mr. President, I don't

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know what it's all about, but I know that the man down there in the Situation Room tells me it's very important and you should know, and that probably you know all about it." He said, "Well, what do you think it's about?" I replied, "I think from what I've been told, it means we have done certain things, taken certain defensive measures, that the Soviets will know about very quickly and it will frighten them." And he said, "That's right." Then he said, "You think we're right - doing this?" I said "Mr. President, I don't know whether we're right or not." "Well", he said, "I'm not sure I do either." That was in effect all he said; and I took the message back down and went downstairs again.

This experience rather shook me. It was one of the steps in the escalation of this thing. When you think what measures we take to analyze everything that the Soviets do and assume that they have the same measures on their side, you have a kind of "ladder" effect. Both sides are getting closer and closer to the point where their sane judgment becomes defective. The panic level increases; and this was one step up that ladder on the panic level.

KRAFT: Were there any specific things you can recollect that were involved in this thing?

FORRESTAL: I think basically - If I remember correctly - this message had to do with moving certain SAC aircraft from their regular bases to

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civilian and other airfields - with all the communications that that would involve; and also getting a certain number of tankers up in the air on a continuous round -the-clock basis. But mostly it had to do with the new communications circuits that would have to be established in order to accomplish this deployment. And that is what is listened to by the Soviets.

KRAFT: It was activating these new communications?

FORRESTAL: Yes. In a manner which would suggest that we were preparing something very big and very serious - that we were preparing for a retaliatory strike.

KRAFT: What was the President's mood and appearance? Calm or excited?

FORRESTAL: He was quite calm and slightly amused that I had arrived quite frightened. I think he saw that I was quite concerned about it and didn't know what to do with it; and I think he was teasing a bit when he said, "Well, all right, you brought this message to me - now what do you want me to do?"

KRAFT: What was the second episode?

FORRESTAL: The second transaction was I think on an early Sunday morning of that same week. We had had, you remember, a private message from Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] the night before, Saturday night. I was on duty that Saturday night - I was on duty when that message came in.

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KRAFT: Can you describe that - how it came in?

FORRESTAL: That was a message that we subsequently learned was delayed almost nine hours in transmission. It came from Kohler [Foy D. Kohler] in Moscow. Apparently it had been handed to Kohler who immediately got it on his wire, but for reasons which I have never discovered there was a very lengthy delay, probably in the translation plus some atmospheric or –

KRAFT: Were the translators in Moscow?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Rough translations were made right there in Moscow. And it came across our wires in the regular way, but at first it was rather badly garbled. It was an amazing document. It was quite clearly a message written by one man, no doubt Khrushchev; and it probably wasn't cleared with anybody else before it was sent, because it rambled. It was not the usual type of Communist diplomatic note. It was a rambling document, very personal, very fretful. It almost had a whining tone about it. It appealed to President Kennedy as the only other great leader in the world. How could he expect, having caused this crisis, that the Russians could retreat their national pride was now involved. Really it appealed to President Kennedy to find a way out. And then of course this was the message that offered a solution. It said, in effect, we (the Soviets) will be willing to withdraw our missiles if you will promise not to invade Cuba. There was something in the nature of a real plea from a man

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in trouble - that was the impression that you got from the message.

Well, that had come in on Saturday night. The President had seen it; but we were pretty tired at that point. I think the whole group - the executive committee had been meeting almost continuously for two weeks by that time.

KRAFT: What did you do when that came in. Did you bring that up to the President? Did you take it to the executive committee?

FORRESTAL: It came in early enough in the evening, around 7 o'clock, so that I didn't do it. I think Mac had it (Mac was still there). So I think it was taken up by Mac to the President. The President analyzed it, then I believe they gave instructions for an answer to be prepared over night; and he retired.

That night I spent in the White House, because that was the night when the Russian ships were coming up to the blockade area. Some of them had by that time already turned around, but we had two that hadn't - one Lebanese freighter, and I think another Russian ship. The Lebanese freighter was challenged. I think we let the Russian through on the grounds that it was actually a tanker. It couldn't have carried anything of any importance. We didn't bother the President that night. But the next morning at 9 o'clock the machines began clattering again; this time with another message from Khrushchev. It was a message that began in a much more official way. It had obviously been prepared by the Soviet Foreign

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Office and appropriately cleared around the Soviet Government, and in effect it said, "We'll take our missiles out of Cuba if you'll take your missiles out of Turkey (and I think it even mentioned Italy.)" Quite a different tone - it was hard-line; it was tough; it was what you would expect. It was a Russian message. And I took this up to President Kennedy that morning right away and gave that message to him. This really stopped everything for awhile, because we had been operating on the premise that the Russians had acceded. I think that was the meeting of the executive committee in which the Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy] suggested that we ignore the second message and act as if we had only received the first. Not to try to pretend that we hadn't, but only answer that one directly.

KRAFT: Was it the Attorney General who suggested that?

FORRESTAL: I think so. I wasn't in the room when he did. I was in and out of the room, and I remember that (it seems to me) on the third or fourth visit up there, bringing more messages, it had somehow been decided that was what was to be done. Later I heard that it was the Attorney General who had made the suggestion.

KRAFT: Did you bring these messages directly to the President?

FORRESTAL: Yes, and then he read them aloud. The Khrushchev message I brought up. The first Khrushchev message he got the night before; the second Khrushchev message he got just before the Executive Committee. Then he got additional messages from our people in Florida regarding

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their state of readiness. The problem before the Executive Committee at that time (it wasn't just sitting back and sort of waiting for the Russians to react) - We had an on-going period of preparations that were taking place, and we also had a very stiff time schedule. If I remember correctly, the invasion was due to begin late Monday or early Tuesday morning; and it would have been very hard to have called it back. The reason for that was that our best calculations showed that the first Russian MRBM's would be operational sometime on Wednesday so we had to keep going. The President was working under considerable tension. Also, I think it was pretty obvious by that Sunday, that our people were very tired, and I imagine the Soviets were also terribly tired. This is something that really impressed me more than anything else. The main people in our Government had detached themselves from their regular work and were acting not just as policy makers, but also operators at the same time. These were the people who gave the orders and were making policy, and nobody else was involved. Some journalist said at the time that if this crisis had gone on very much longer, we would have been in very bad shape in the American Government, because we were keeping Secretaries McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], Rusk [Dean Rusk] and members of the Executive Committee almost working on a round-the-clock basis.

But I think it was on Monday morning early that the Moscow radio broadcast...the third Russian message came through. This was not

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delivered by diplomatic channels - this was a local broadcast actually. A Russian broadcast picked up by the FBIS announcing the return to the original Khrushchev message...that they were prepared to get out if we would give some indication not to invade Cuba. Furthermore, they were prepared to discuss inspection. That was what broke it. I also took that message up to the President. That came in, and there was a great feeling of obvious relief at that point.

KRAFT: Was there any specific thing you can remember ?

FORRESTAL: As a matter of fact, I didn't actually take it up - I called him on the telephone, and I read it to him. The only thing I remember him saying was, "Well, Mike, I think maybe we can all return to normal now and get back to our regular work."

KRAFT: How about the second message when you brought that up.

FORRESTAL: Went very grim - a very grim reaction. In fact, he had a sort of I-didn't-expect-this-to-happen reaction to it. He said, "First of all, how did this come? Where did this come from? Where have you gotten it from? Are you sure this is an accurate message from the Soviets? Did it come from Kohler? Why do you think it is so different from the one we got earlier?" Of course none of us knew. I suggested that this was one done by the Government and not by Khrushchev himself. But he just had a rather grim reaction.

KRAFT: Did he ever talk about this afterward to you?

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FORRESTAL: No. He never did. The only other thing I do remember - one other thing - that impressed me very much about the Cuban crisis. On the day that - this would have been about Monday or Tuesday of the week following the week when he first discovered the missiles. Actually, it was the day that he made his speech. Tuesday, I think it was - the 22nd. The third public announcement of this. We had had an all-day meeting. He had come back from Chicago on Saturday. I think it was Sunday, the following day when there had been almost an all-day meeting on it. I was in on only the last hour of that meeting. They had obviously been talking about the various things that we should do, running all the way from trying to take out the SAM sites to a full-scale invasion of Cuba. He had apparently sat through the whole day listening to the various solutions that the Cabinet and Executive Committee had proposed. They had already decided on the blockade. I think this was on Sunday afternoon. The basic approach had been decided upon. (I think there were people who disagreed with it) but the Government had more or less

reached a consensus on it; and at the very end just before the meeting was over President Kennedy said, "Well, we've made our decision now. Quite frankly, I think it'll be an unpopular decision. I think we will lose votes" (this was because there was an election coming up shortly thereafter) "but I think on balance, we will have lost this Administration more than we will have gained out of this operation. But we've made the decision, and the thing to do is to stick with it, and try to carry it through. If it's successful, then everybody will

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applaud us; and if it isn't successful, we'll have to take the consequences." I think, as a matter of fact, he used that Chinese proverb that "success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan." He produced quite an emotional effect that made everybody in the room feel - Well, let there be an end to debate. Let's get on with the job - right or wrong - this is the way we'll play it.

KRAFT: And this was, you recollect, on a Sunday? On October 21st?

FORRESTAL: Yes. It was then the following afternoon that he decided to make his radio speech.

KRAFT: Then it must have been on Saturday, because the speech was on the 22nd ... a Monday.

FORRESTAL: No, it was Sunday - the night before the speech. He came back to Washington, I think, on Saturday.

We went to great lengths to get the Cabinet into the White House - the various members of the Executive Committee in the White House - on Sunday morning without having the newspapermen notice this. They used all sorts of entrances that had never been used before to spirit people in. As you remember, there was all sorts of speculation as to what was going on.

KRAFT: Does that pretty much wrap up the Cuba missiles episode?

FORRESTAL: Yes, I think that is all I've got that is of any interest on the Cuban missile crisis.

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KRAFT: Why don't we move on to what I'm going to call the "Indonesian problem", even though it involves how Maphilindo - Can you give me the setting of your coming into this problem? How you first got into it? And also give perhaps at the beginning some sense of what you thought the President was trying to do in this area, and perhaps then we can trace its development and the development of the idea.

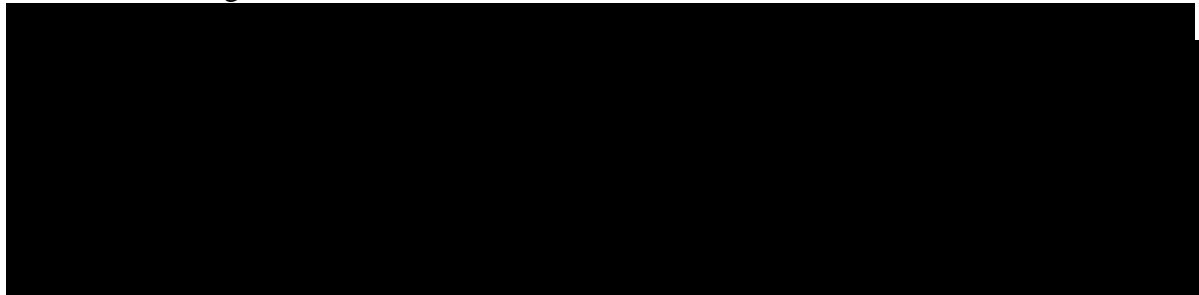
FORRESTAL: As far as I'm concerned, Indonesia began with the West Irian crisis, or the West Irian problem; and I wasn't down here when the most interesting and intriguing part of that crisis came to the President. Bob Komer, in the White House, was so far as I know the principal operating force behind the Government's activities in the West Irian crisis. He was operating in very, very close cahoots with the President at the time. So I only followed it from a distance. I had come down to work on the Far East, but the West Irian thing was a little bit off to one side. I think it was largely due to Komer, or at least partly due to him, that Ambassador Bunker [Ellsworth Bunker] was appointed to try to arrange a series of very quiet meetings in some house in Virginia to work out an arrangement between the Dutch and the Indonesians.

KRAFT: This was after the Attorney General's trip?

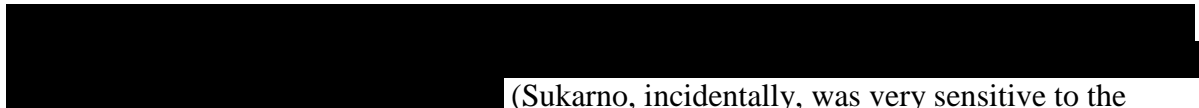
FORRESTAL: Yes. I think the Attorney General went out the fall before. In the fall of 1961; and it was in December - January, February of 1962 that the West Irian negotiations were being carried on. So I was really not at all involved in those. As a matter of fact, when I first got down

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there I really wasn't very sympathetic to the solutions. It seemed to me to be outrageous that the Dutch were being robbed of their last territory there. The Indonesians were just being greedy. I just had a very simplistic view of it. But then later on - it would have been in the summer and fall of '62 - as I got more and more involved in all Far Eastern matters, Indonesia became one of my problems. Bob Komer gave it up because he had to work on the Near East. Then I started to get interested in it.



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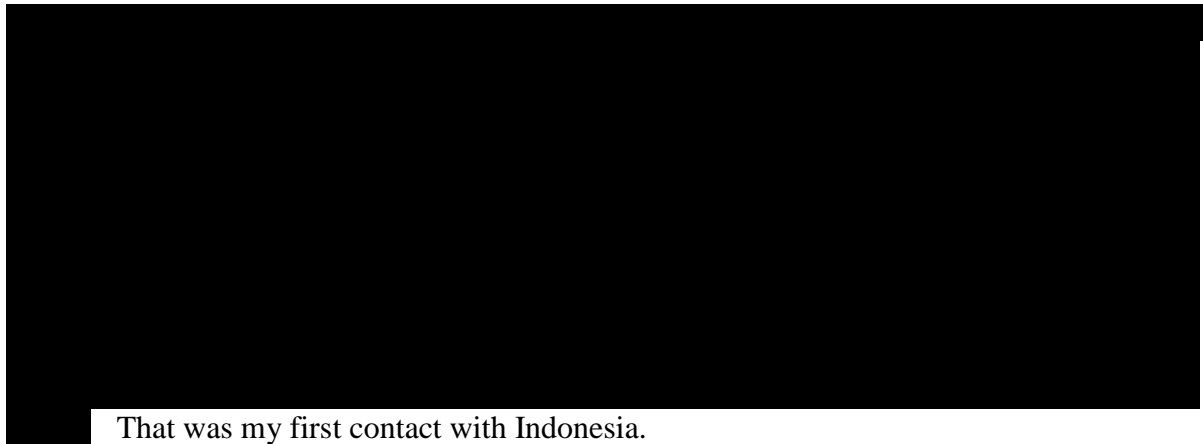


(Sukarno, incidentally, was very sensitive to the interest the President had in him. It was - and still is for that matter - one of the things Sukarno took most seriously about the United States, the fact that he had a personal relationship with one of the great leaders of the world. He felt no such personal relationship with Khrushchev and certainly none with Mao [Mao Zedong].)

KRAFT: What are the indications of his taking this seriously?

FORRESTAL: Oh, he's interested in the family. He wants to know what has happened to Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], what she is doing, what kind of horses she rides, what are the children doing. What movies do they like, what books are they reading? That kind of an interest. Then, of course, he is an immensely vain man. He then tells you what he's doing, so as to be sure that gets back to the President. He has a little bit of the quality of a kind of person who admires movie stars and likes to feel closely involved with them. If you wanted to get anything out of Sukarno - that was the sort of thing that you had to play upon. But I told him that the Kennedy family, particularly the President and Bobby, were very

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That was my first contact with Indonesia.

There was one thing that kept coming up, of course, all the time. Whenever our Ambassador, Howard Jones [Howard P. Jones], had a problem with the Indonesians, he used to find that talking about the possibility of President Kennedy making a trip to Sukarno was always a useful way to put Sukarno into a good mood. So he would constantly be badgering the President and Ambassador Jones to make promises and commitments

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about when he would come to Indonesia. I had some of the most amusing times with President Kennedy drafting language and letters that didn't say when he would ever make the trip, but would repeat the affection he felt for Indonesia in general and President Sukarno in particular. I think the President was actually interested in Sukarno. I don't think probably that he had any respect for him as an individual; but he certainly had a lot of sympathetic curiosity about him.

KRAFT: I thought that he felt that he was almost impossible to work with. That he really didn't like him much at all - disliked and distrusted him a great deal.

FORRESTAL: Yes, I think that's part of it, but I think also he recognized that the man was the real leader of one of the great Asian countries.

KRAFT: Were you in on the settlement of the West Irian problem? I think that took place in May of...the Bunker agreement was finally effected in July.

FORRESTAL: No, really only peripherally. I followed it. Bob Komer had started it, and he was mostly concerned with it. Bob and I used to consult a lot. We used to conduct battles with EUR, that part of the State Department and the Far Eastern part, headed at that time by Harriman [William Averell Harriman]. Harriman used to complain continuously that the Department of State was dominated by the Europhiles, the Eurocentrists; and it was very difficult to get them to understand that really Holland's interest in West Irian had very little to do with U.S. interests in the world. In fact, it wasn't even in the best interests of Holland that she should be

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making a show of force for this colony.

KRAFT: Did you have indications from the President what his rationale would be, why he was doing what he was doing, what was the governing consideration with respect to his view of Indonesia?

FORRESTAL: Yes, I do have some understanding of it. In fact, he used to say quite brutally, "Indonesia is the nation of 100, 000, 000 people with perhaps more resources than any other nation in Asia. Whether we like it or not (or whether anybody else likes it or not) sooner or later she will take her place in that part of the world as one of the dominating elements. It doesn't make any sense for the United States to go out of its way permanently to alienate this large group of people sitting on these resources – unless there is some very, very persuasive reason for doing it. So each time you have to analyze in the balance Indonesia on the one hand and other interests of the United States." Well, in the case of West Irian, the only other interest the United States really had was whether or not the Dutch should be supported in their claim to what is essentially a useless bit of territory in the South Pacific. I think he was really quite worried about the moral problem - with not having people keep their agreements; but I think his basic feeling was that in the long run the United States cannot set its face against the facts of the world. We must find ways and means of settling this thing, so that both the Dutch and Indonesians can come out of it with their prestige intact.

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KRAFT: Did he ever talk about Indonesia as a possible counter-weight to Chinese influence?

FORRESTAL: No, I don't think that the President ever talked that way. Other people did, but not the President.

KRAFT: With West Irian disposed of, the next venture came with the rise of the Maphilindo problem with the Malaysian/Indonesian tension. Can you describe when that happened and what that was all about? How we formulated the American position?

FORRESTAL: Yes. For some time (I think concurrently with the West Irian problem) the British (this would be in 1962) had for some time been working on a way of extricating themselves altogether from Malaya - really from the Far East. It was a period in English foreign policy when it was pretty clear that they wanted to liquidate all colonial possessions; and Singapore and Malaya were on the list. In order to do this, they came up with the idea that it would be useful to have an arrangement that would somehow let them out of the Borneo territories (Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei), and in the process graft them on to Malaya and by doing that insure that there would be a Malayan majority over the Chinese in the Malay state, or in the new nation of Malaysia. They never consulted us on this process. They were very frightened of Lee Kuan Yew, the fellow who runs Singapore. They thought he was a Communist. We didn't, but they did. They subsequently found out that he wasn't. But anyway, under the fear that the Singapore Chinese

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might dominate Malaya, they thought they could graft on these other three territories which were predominantly non-Chinese, and achieve some kind of stability in a new going viable country, which would let them get out of the area completely. They didn't consult with us, and of course that wasn't so bad, since they bore the major responsibility. But tragically they failed ever to consult the Indonesians. In fact, they were quite rude to the Indonesians. The Indonesians did ask them what they had in mind and said they thought that since the territories bordered their country, it might be wise if there was a conference between the three countries before the decision was finally made. Well, the British rebuffed the Indonesians on this and went ahead with their plans. The plans came to a head in the summer of 1963, I think. (I'm not quite clear on the date.)

KRAFT: Did we have any talk on this thing with the Filipinos ?

FORRESTAL: No. You see, at this point the Filipinos had no interest in this at all. They didn't develop an interest until after the Indonesians began making trouble. And the Indonesians didn't begin making trouble until plans for the unification of these three countries were announced. This is where I'm a little hazy on dates. It didn't happen until...it was in August...

KRAFT: August 1962. August 1, 1962 British announced the constitutional committee.

FORRESTAL: August 1962 - there it is.

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FORRESTAL: Yes. They announced it a year ahead of time. And that triggered Indonesian concern. And almost, I think, from that date the Indonesians began - rather mildly at first - to object. During that period also, probably sometime during the fall of '62, the Filipinos revived an ancient and not very persuasive claim, legal claim, that they had on the part of the territories in North Borneo. The reason the Filipinos did this was, I think, just to get into the act more than anything else. They didn't want to be left out if this territory was going to be carved up among their neighbors. Indonesia's objections got stronger and stronger through the year, culminating, I think, probably in August of '63 in their decision to make a confrontation about Malaysia. Now the sadness of all this is that President Kennedy, after the West Irian dispute had been settled, accepted a recommendation of the State Department (and I think all of us who were concerned in this) that the United States should make a real effort to take advantage of the settlement of the West Irian dispute to turn Indonesia's attention to her own internal problems. Sukarno thought well of us and may have really believed that we had done this for him. This was one of the reasons why he felt that President Kennedy was his dearest and best friend. But President Kennedy's reaction to this was - well, now we have a little leverage in this country, let's get out and use it; and let's try to direct Sukarno's attention to his internal economic problem;

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and let's see what we can persuade him to do and offer in the way of help to him to shore up what was already by then a very bad economic mess in Indonesia.

KRAFT: I see; and it was in this connection that you launched a special Indonesian aid program. (I don't know if that's the right way to describe it.)

FORRESTAL: Yes. That's fair enough. We made (that is, the White House) made a real effort to mobilize very quickly not only our own resources, (that was one thing) but also we got the IMF to go out there and do a study of the Indonesian balance of payments problem. There was a man called Djuanda [Djuanda Kartadiwidjaja], who was then Prime Minister of Indonesia, whom we thought quite highly of. He was sort of sensible Western-minded fellow who understood about economics. Sukarno did not - he hated economics. And so we got the IMF to send a team out there. We got our own people to do a very thick report (I've forgotten the name of the report now.) It was a special group that was hired by AID to go out and do a survey of the Indonesian economy and pick out those things which would be useful for us to press. And I believe that we had at one time \$100 million earmarked for Indonesian aid; and we had gone to our European allies, who of course are intensely interested in Indonesia. Even the Dutch by this time were quite interested at this time in getting back into Indonesia on a commercial basis. By July 1962

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we had an IMF standby agreement for \$40 million; we had our own commitment - semi-commitment - to go in for \$100 million in Indonesian development; and we had the Russians and the Yugoslavs and all the Eastern bloc countries and all the Western bloc countries agreed to re-schedule Indonesian debts to the tune of some \$400 million over a ten-year period. Plus we had given the Indonesians a loan in December of 1962 for spare parts which they desperately needed to get their industry going again. So that by the mid-summer of '62 it really looked as though the West had a chance to help get Indonesia on its feet. Sukarno made a speech in July or August of '62, in which he said his first priority for Indonesia was to put its economic house in order. He was going to impose certain measures, certain austerity measures which would be unpopular but necessary: higher taxes, devaluation of the currency - all the things that the IMF had proposed be done. President Kennedy was quite happy about this. And our European allies had come across nicely. And suddenly in August - late August I think - something happened that Sukarno decided in his belly or somewhere that economics were too much of a bore, and he confronted Malaysia. That was about when he decided to go all out in confrontation -and the moment that happened we called everything off. All these programs we had so carefully prepared just clattered flatly to the ground.

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KRAFT: There has been a good deal of difficulty inside the Government with the Congress in the launching of these programs. Is that anything special to talk about? Or is that just the normal flak of...

FORRESTAL: As a matter of fact there hadn't been too much difficulty prior to the confrontation of Malaysia. There had been great difficulty during the West Irian period. But I think that the sentiment in the Congress was that although they had grave misgivings about letting down a European ally like the Dutch - the Dutch after they had lost West Irian had privately told everybody through all their commercial channels and their regular representation here that this was the best thing that ever happened to Holland to get rid of this terrible mess with some degree of face-saving, and let the Indonesians have it. It doesn't do anybody any good, and it will cost us a lot less. So the Congressional feeling had died down a good deal. We reported to Congress all the plans we had for the Indonesians. We consulted regularly with both the opposition and the leadership and really had no trouble. In fact, people like Representative Broomfield [William S. Broomfield], who normally were our most difficult people, were really quite hopeful that something good could come of this - maybe Indonesia could be turned to the West.

KRAFT: Well, then in August you had the simultaneous turning away by Indonesia and the British proposal for Malaysia.

FORRESTAL: Well, the British proposal had preceded this by a year. They

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had announced the formation of Malaysia. Indonesian opposition had been rumbling. They had been complaining about not being consulted all during the time we had been negotiating with them, but no one took it very seriously. This really caught us by surprise. That is, caught the United States by surprise.

[REDACTED]

So it came rather as a shock to find that the Indonesians, or at least Sukarno personally, thought Malaysia was so serious that he would kick over all his connections with the West in order to have a confrontation.

KRAFT: Once that thing began - in '63 that began getting rough - I take it Maphilindo was started.

FORRESTAL: Well, Maphilindo was actually an Australian idea, although the Australians now deny it vehemently. But I think there was a meeting in Manila in the fall, I think, of 1963, and the Australian Foreign Minister, Sir Garfield Barwick, went to Manila and talked to Macapagal [Diosdado P. Macapagal] about the very ugly situation that was developing between Malaysia and Indonesia.

KRAFT: There had actually been some military activity, hadn't there?

FORRESTAL: On a very low level - that was just starting. There was more talk than there had been military activity; but there had been a lot of talk about military moves; and Barwick went to Manila. I think he suggested to Macapagal that the three of them ought to get together.

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The Philippines had made a claim against the British on North Borneo; and the Indonesians and the Malaysians should all get together, talk about their differences, and see maybe if there wasn't a way of solving the problem by treating it as a cooperative venture. I don't think Barwick was very specific, but anyway Macapagal says that he's the one that gave him the idea of Maphilindo. Macapagal then called a meeting in Manila; and I don't remember exactly when that meeting took place.

KRAFT: I'm sure I'll be able to get the dates for that.

FORRESTAL: We had nothing to do with this. We were completely outside of it. We weren't talking to any of the parties on this. Averell Harriman had taken the position before that...

KRAFT: I think it was August 1963.

FORRESTAL: Yes, it could have been as early as that. Prior to this meeting in Manila... of course what I am doing here is recounting to you history that can be checked out. But there had been a demand by Sukarno that there be an independent election in the two Borneo territories to ascertain whether they really wanted to join Malaysia; and in response to that demand, the UN Secretary General appointed a commission to make a report on the elections which had previously been held. It wasn't a new referendum, but it was a report on a previous election, because they went through that, but Sukarno wasn't satisfied.

KRAFT: When did we actively get into the promotion of Maphilindo?

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FORRESTAL: We never really did. I think that President Kennedy's main feeling was that, first of all, the British had fouled this thing up. They had, in order to counter-balance Singapore, gone into the idea of Malaysia without really taking into account the fact that these three territories that had been completely docile and happy colonies were incapable of self-government, and that the Malaysians on the mainland were not capable of providing them with government. It was too much strain on the resources of a rather small country 300 miles away across the seas to try to govern these rather different territories. Now the President understood that very well - He kept saying that; but after all the British did have the primary responsibility. He did not want to get involved in that problem anymore than other people wanted to get desperately involved in our problems in Southeast Asia. The British are there and we must somehow back them up.

KRAFT: Was there continuing pressure from the British or the Filipinos or the Indonesians for the United States to take a position?

FORRESTAL: Yes, of a very sophisticated sort. They never until recently came out and said that they wanted us to take a position. It was largely Harriman who carried the President's burden on this. Every time Harriman met an English official he would say, "Of course Malaysia is your problem - isn't it? You don't want us in there, and we don't want to be in there." The English response was always, "Oh yes, of course it's our problem; and we'll take care of it; but couldn't you

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help us a little bit by cutting off the relations with Indonesia?" They were very anxious. The British always over-estimated our influence in Indonesia. They thought we could do more than we actually could. They assumed we were giving them more help than we were. But I think President Kennedy's view of this was that unpleasant though Sukarno was (he could be an impossible man to deal with) here again the facts of the situation, the geography, the nature of the problem suggested strongly that the purposes of the United States would not be served by having a botch made of the attempt to create a new state right next door to this great

big power. Of course he was very friendly to Malaysia. You know Bobby Kennedy did a tour through Malaya before election and so did the President - I think they both went together, if I'm not mistaken. At some point during the emergency, you remember, the Communists guerrillas in Malaya - in the '50s. They had both been out there and had seen what an extraordinary job the British and the Malaysians had done together against the Chinese Communist insurgents. He never forgot that.

In talking about Vietnam, the President would very often refer back to the job the British had done, so he had this very strong feeling that when it came down to earth, they knew what they were doing rather better than we did. So he didn't like to give them advice and interfere in it. But he had a nagging doubt that what they were doing in Borneo was the right thing. Right in the middle of this period in August the President asked

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me to go out to Indonesia on the economic problem. This was just before Sukarno announced that confrontation would thenceforth be the policy of Indonesia. I had a long talk with Sukarno, tried to talk to him about economics. He just said, "Don't talk to me - talk to my friend, Djuanda, here. He understands these things, I don't." But he said, "What do you think about these terrible British in Singapore? Why do you Americans support their continued presence where they shouldn't be?"

And I said, "President Sukarno, you know that if it weren't for the British and ourselves, the Chinese would be in your country in no time." He stopped for a moment and said, "Well, yes. You're quite right about that. You know, if the British had only stayed in Borneo for another ten or fifteen years, that would have been perfect. We're not going to attack the British Empire or the British Navy. They were running those colonies quite well. Our hope," said Sukarno, "was that the British would put those colonies into a much better state; they would get their economies going, and they would be happy, peaceful colonies. And then, of course, because they are so close to us, we would eventually take them over from the British. But instead the British tried to give them away to that louse Abdul Rahman [Tunku Abdul Rahman], whom I can't stand, and I won't sit still for that." It was almost on that petulant, personal note.

KRAFT: One of the transactions with the Indonesians at this period concerned an oil agreement. I think that was in the fall of 1963.

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FORRESTAL: Yes. I think one of the most typical of President Kennedy's diplomatic efforts. It involved a kind of diplomacy which, I think, was new in his Administration. The oil companies - Caltex, Stanvac and Shell - had for several years gotten themselves into a very unpleasant bind with the Indonesian government. Their contracts were all running out; and in anticipation of their contracts running out, the Indonesian government had begun to put the screws to the companies in order to make the renewal of the contracts take place under the most favorable circumstances to

Indonesia. They had put so many screws on the companies that at a certain point (I think it was in August) representatives of the companies came to Washington and explained to Governor Harriman that they had just about had it. Now, of course, when an oil company tells you that, you always take it with a grain of salt, because you're never quite sure whether this isn't just another negotiating point on their part. But they made a very persuasive case; and they pretty well laid out all their economic facts on the table in the State Department. And they convinced Harriman, who in turn convinced the President that this time it wasn't just a case of an American company trying to get special advantage, but that these people had just about reached the end of the economic rope. Unless a settlement could be reached, and pretty quickly, they were just going to pull out - cut their investments, write them off and leave. Well, this would have meant that Indonesia would have had to find somebody else to exploit oil;

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and the only other people who are in that area of the world and who need it are the Chinese; and of course there were in the background all kinds of rumors that the Chinese had made attractive offers to Indonesia. Well, Harriman put this to the President and suggested that the President send, because of the nature of Sukarno, the kind of a man he is, a personal emissary to see if he couldn't get a reversal of policy out of Sukarno. It just happened that we knew Sukarno was on his way to Tokyo. The President's idea, knowing Sukarno's habits well enough, said, "This is the time to get to him. Get him while he's in Tokyo having fun; and get him while he's away from his Communist ministers or Communist sympathizing ministers. Let's send somebody out." Then there was a discussion who it might be, and it turned out that everybody agreed that Wilson Wyatt would be the ideal type; and the President suggested that Abe Chayes [Abram Chayes] go with him. Harriman got hold of the man who really was indispensable, Walter Levy from New York, who was a remarkable man who knows so much about oil that he is trusted by both sides in most oil arguments.

Well, they went out and they caught Sukarno in the right mood in the right place. In three days they had an agreement hammered out that the oil companies for 2 1/2 years had been trying to get. Again, the reason it worked was because of the flattery involved in Wyatt's going out as President Kennedy's personal representative. Kennedy, before Wyatt left (I was up in his office late one afternoon) - I guess

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it was just after Wyatt had left the office, after having had his picture taken with the President) said, "My God, what am I going to give Sukarno? I've given him "Profiles in Courage", and I think I've given him several other books and I'm running out of books. What shall we do?" He went up to the bookcase in his library; and he looked through the bookcase in his library. The first thing both our eyes lit upon was the collected speeches of Richard Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]. The President looked at that for a moment and he said, "Why don't I just send him that?" He laughed and then collected himself and said, "No, I'll consult with Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln]. We must have some book that I've got around here that is appropriate. " Then the next day he called up and said, "I've found the book". I think it was a collection of all

his own speeches while in the office as President of the United States; and he wrote a very nice inscription on it: "To President Sukarno who has..." I can't remember exactly how it was; but it made the point that Sukarno was the leader of a country whose potential today was as great as that of the United States in 1800, and that all that was needed was the kind of leadership, of which Sukarno was certainly capable, to realize that potential - something flattering but pointed like that.

KRAFT: While we're on this, there was one brush with the Philippines, wasn't there, with respect to the War Claims bill and a visit by Macapagal?

FORRESTAL: Yes. That was unpleasant. That was a Congressional action that occurred, I believe, also that summer. The Philippines had had

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before Congress for several years a continuing claim against the United States for war damages amounting to about some \$70 million. It had become a political football in the Congress - various people disagreed on the way in which this money should be handed out; and this was one of the cases where the Administration, quite frankly, had not been following the Congressional politics of an important bill in foreign affairs. It caught everybody by surprise. As I recollect, I remember calling up Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] from time to time to ask about this bill. I don't think Larry was very interested in it; the only people who were interested in it were the desk officers in the State Department, but they were too milky and lacked the kind of aggressive quality that you need to get something going in Washington. Nobody paid any attention to them. So, it was a kind of a thunder clap just after the President had invited Macapagal to come to the United States that summer. Macapagal had accepted to come (I think it was in July) and Mrs. Kennedy was working on a...on another Mount Vernon-type of party. I'm not so sure that he wasn't coming on July 4th or some appropriate date like that. But sometime earlier, probably in May or June, the Congress turned down the War Damage Bill. And the effect in the Philippines was disastrous. Both parties in the Philippines had a heyday on a sort of "hate-the-United-States" week, and this resulted in Macapagal's cancelling his trip. President Kennedy drafted or wrote him several letters, trying to explain the inner workings of American democracy, but it wasn't until the Congress

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finally turned around several months later and passed the bill that we ever got back on even footing with the Philippines. And even today Macapagal still hasn't come to this country, and there is still a certain amount of resentment about the whole episode.

KRAFT: Let's talk about Laos now. You came into that right at the beginning. Can you describe the situation as it was in your eyes?

FORRESTAL: Yes. Because the day I arrived down from New York to take up work in the White House, the President had on his mind, or at least my first discussion with him was the situation as it then existed in Laos, which roughly was this:

The year before Harriman had gone to Geneva and had successfully negotiated the outlines of an agreement on Laos for the neutralization of Laos, but it depended upon the formation by the three factions, the Neutralists, the Communists and the Rightists led by General Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] of a coalition government. The conference adjourned, I think, sometime in November with the understanding that all nations involved would do their best to bring these Laotian factions together. Apparently before I arrived, efforts that had been made by the Department of State to persuade General Phoumi and Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong to get together had resulted in complete failure. So I got down to the President's office, had asked him what I was supposed to do; and he told me I was supposed to work in the Far East. I think I've already described it to you. He said, "Well, I think the first thing for you to do is to get on a plane and go back

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to New York and get the first plane out to Vientiane and stay out there until you have helped to persuade General Phoumi to join the coalition government. Harriman knows all about it - talk with him. He called up Harriman and told him I was coming over. I went over to see Harriman about it. Harriman is the world's worst travel agent. You never want to get yourself in his hands. He had me on a thirty-two hour flight from New York to Vientiane, going in the wrong direction via Europe; and before I could object I had had all my shots in one afternoon. Then I jumped on the plane and arrived with Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan].

KRAFT: This was a commercial airline?

FORRESTAL: Yes, commercial all the way. Thirty-two hours later, a complete wreck, I was dumped on the doorstep of Ambassador Brown [Winthrop G. Brown] in Vientiane. I was there for six weeks - six of the most unpleasant weeks in my life. Vientiane had been evacuated of all U.S. dependents about six months before at the time of the attack on Vientiane; and American morale of course at its lowest possible ebb. There was violent disagreement between [REDACTED] the military on the one hand and Ambassador Brown, who received his instructions from the State Department, on the other. Ambassador Brown had been trying to persuade General Phoumi to accept the government under Souvanna Phouma, and, I'm afraid, our military, not understanding this, [REDACTED] that they couldn't bring themselves to accept this solution.

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KRAFT: Who were the military then? Was that an AID mission?

FORRESTAL: No. We had a MAAG - Military Assistance Group headed by a very good, really excellent, Major General Boyle [Andrew Jackson Boyle]. He did understand the problem, but his staff did not. Then of course the Right Wing government at the time was so unpopular in the country that it could not rally support for an effective fight against the Communists. What you had to do was to defuse the situation. And the Communists were apparently willing to do this (I have never quite understood why - I assume they felt they could make more progress on the political front than they could on the military front). In any event, our effort was to try to convince Phoumi that he should accept this political solution, realize that all it meant was an end to the fighting, and then concentrate on building his government (or rather Souvanna Phouma's government) into something that was popular and acceptable to the people and then win elections. Well, Sullivan and I spent quite a lot of time down there. We had several conferences with General Phoumi. On one occasion General Phoumi promised us in so many words: he said, "I don't agree with it, but I accept the American position. I understand why you are taking it; and I will do what you advise and do my best to make it work." Sullivan and I went back to Vientiane with this happy news. We had seen him at Savannakhet on an island in the middle of the river. He didn't want anybody overhearing his conversation. We went back and reported this to Ambassador Brown, and Ambassador Brown said, "Well, I'll believe it

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when I hear it." And the very next day General Phoumi made a speech broadcast on the radio saying that two young emissaries from Washington had visited him at Savannakhet and had attempted to persuade him to betray the sacred trust of the Lao people, but he was resisting these blandishments, and that the fight would be carried on, and that he refused to accept the Geneva Accords. So, when this happened, Sullivan and I decided that the problem was too big to be solved by a Cohn [Roy M. Cohn] and Schine [G. David Schine] team. We cabled President Kennedy, explained that we had not succeeded in this mission and asked President Kennedy to send Harriman, who was then in Baguio, which the President did. He told Harriman, after he left Baguio, to go to Bangkok first and then up to Vientiane. Harriman did that. We met Harriman in Bangkok.

We had an extraordinary meeting. Sarit [Sarit Thanarat] was then the Prime Minister of Thailand and was a great supporter of General Phoumi. We met at a town (Nong Khai) on the shores of the Mekong just on the other side of the border of Laos. General Phoumi came over the river to meet with Sarit and Harriman. It was a very tense sort of meeting, because Sarit was really trying also to convince Phoumi. Sarit had half convinced himself that there was no other way out of this, although he wasn't fully convinced, just sort of half convinced. He and Phoumi talked - they talked a lot in Thai, which of course neither of us understood except for one young fellow from the Embassy we brought with us who did, and he explained to us what they were saying.

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But Phoumi remained unconvinced. Harriman then went across the river that afternoon and the following morning attended a Cabinet meeting with General Phoumi and his full

Cabinet. It was at that meeting that Harriman (I think it has been reported elsewhere) pointed to each one of the Lao Ministers at a certain moment when he was very angry and said, "If you wish to betray your country in the way in which you are now doing by insisting on trying to fight this way, everyone of you will either die here in Vientiane or you'll die trying to swim the river Mekong in Thailand." He just went down the list and pointed his finger at each one of them. Well, this is a very rough sort of thing to do to an Asian, and they were badly shaken by it of course for reason of face. They stood firm in their refusal, and Harriman left for home. In the meantime, General Phoumi was preparing for an attack upon Nam Tha.

KRAFT: Had some natural sanctions been applied?

FORRESTAL: Not at that point - no. They were applied shortly thereafter. We all went back to Washington to reconsider the problem, knowing that Phoumi was preparing for resumption of military hostilities against the Communists on his own; and Brown kept saying, "There is no way of doing this by persuasion. The only way you will ever convince General Phoumi that he has to do what you want him to do is to prove to him that you're serious; because he doesn't believe you Forrestal, you Sullivan, or even you, Governor Harriman, when you say these things to

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him- that he must do this and that, because he knows from experience of years that other agencies of the Government will support him, come what may. Well, we went back to Washington and we saw President Kennedy and explained what had happened to us, and then we put Brown's dilemma which was: you've got to make such a dramatic gesture to prove to General Phoumi that the Government of the United States is serious as to risk doing real damage to his military effort. You've got to cut off U.S. aid, and you've got to cut it off in such an effective way that it may really hurt. (That was Brown's recommendation.)

President Kennedy didn't accept that, because his feeling was that things are never as black and white as that. There is always something in between that you can do that will accomplish what you want without doing all the damage. What we did, we did not cut off any military aid to General Phoumi, but we did cut off all cash aid. This, again, is I think an illustration of the kind of way President Kennedy thought, because once we described the situation to him, he said, "Well, obviously this man relies perhaps more on money than he does on guns. He isn't a soldier - the Lao Army has never used a gun effectively in its entire history. What he's really relying on is bribing loyalty - gaining the loyalty of his officers by paying for it. Let's cut off his source of funds." Which we did. We took them off the \$10 million a month dole that we had them on, and that immediately began to produce effects. This, I think, was the President's first hard decision about Laos.

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In the meantime, we began to get word that Phoumi was preparing for an attack on Nam Tha.

KRAFT: The cut-off must have come in April. Is that right?

FORRESTAL: Yes, I believe it did. And Nam Tha came in May.

KRAFT: Could you say a word on the significance of Nam Tha?

FORRESTAL: Yes. From time to time Phoumi had undertaken various military operations which almost always had resulted in his being clobbered by the Communists. He would move forward to attack position, then he'd be chased 25 miles back down the road from where he'd come. And this, mind you, was against the advice of our military people. Our Army was quite clear about this.

KRAFT: Done in violation of the Cease Fire Order.

FORRESTAL: Well, no...not in violation of the Cease Fire. These were always in areas where he honestly had a right to be under the Cease Fire. But in April, and I think possibly in reaction to what we had done, probably in an effort to prove that he could have a military victory, Phoumi airlifted several battalions to Nam Tha against our advice. (In fact, we even refused to provide him with our own airlift. He had to do it with his own planes.)

KRAFT: Did the Thais help him?

FORRESTAL: No, I don't think the Thais did. I think after Harriman's visit the Thais behaved themselves. Previously they had not. Phoumi airlifted 3 or 4 of the crack battalions, and I believe General Kouprasith to Nam Tha.

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It wasn't quite clear why he did it, because it wasn't clear what he was going to attack. He simply put them up there in practically a Dien Bien Phou situation. He got them up there and then there was no way to get them out, if they were attacked by the Pathet Lao. There were no roads to Nam Tha. It was an irresistible temptation to the Communists. General Boyle told him this over and over again. "You know, this is just an insane military maneuver. You're just setting yourself up to get clobbered." And sometime in April the inevitable occurred. The Communists attacked...The Lao officers of the units that were up there skidaddled in jeeps, not only without telling their own people that they were doing it, but without telling any of the American advisors. (I think we had about 30 people up there with them.) And the Lao generals just bugged out, leaving their troops behind, their artillery, everything. And of course as soon as word got around that had happened, the rest of the Lao battalions began racing down the trails as fast as they could to leave Nam Tha. We had to fly them out by helicopter.

KRAFT: American planes?

FORRESTAL: American helicopters. We had a lot of them in there at that time; The only units that fought at all were artillery batteries, at which the American advisors were present and were giving advice and help on. But the Lao ran so fast that they attracted the Pathet Lao who were running behind them, and drew them all the way down to the town of Ban Houi Sai

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on the Mekong river - some 80 miles down the road, or down the trail, right smack on the Thai border. At just about this time I think we had changed our military commanders. I think General Boyle had left just before Nam Tha and General Reuben Tucker replaced him. And Tucker used to write home cables that amused President Kennedy no end. They contained such phrases as "instead of providing artillery to the Lao Army, we should provide them track shoes - the only thing they know how to use"; or other things like "General So-and-so couldn't lead the company around a corner, much less defend himself against an attack" - things of that sort. He was a very salty...or had a very salty way of writing his telegrams.

That was a disaster; and that was the disaster that did two things: first of all, it shook Phoumi's reputation among his own people and his own confidence in himself. Everybody in Vientiane knew that we had opposed this thing. It brought the Communists for the first time right down on the borders of Thailand. This was a very grave situation for the United States, because the whole reason why we had gone into the Geneva Conference was to prevent just this thing from happening.

(End of Side 1 of tape - Second Interview of M. V. Forrestal by J. Kraft)

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KRAFT: We have just reached the point where the Pathet Lao had taken Nam Tha and moved beyond that to the Thai border, and you were faced with a breakdown of the whole purpose of Geneva. What was the American response to that?

FORRESTAL: Although we had been telling Phoumi that something like this would happen, we had none of us actually thought that the Pathet Lao or that Hanoi would be so daring and bold as to rush right to the Mekong River. Of course our Thai friends were paralyzed at this thought, and our own military were put right back into the position where they were in March the year before, when this same kind of thing seemed to be happening. And I've forgotten exactly when the attack on Nam Tha and the move to the Mekong actually finished; but it seems to me there was about a week of almost continuous conferences with the President about what the American response should be.

KRAFT: I think it must have been the second week of May.

FORRESTAL: It must have been the second week of May, that's right. Anyway, it was the time that preceded the decision to send the Marines to Thailand. The President managed this in a typical way. He began by asking Mac Bundy to get together a group of people to meet with him more or less daily on the problem and organize underneath that group various committees to work out alternatives, scenarios, and political and military tracks that the President might follow. We found ourselves in an immediate difference of opinion. General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer]

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was then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Roger Hilsman was Director of INR; Harriman was Assistant Secretary for the Far East. The people at these meetings were normally McNamara and Lemnitzer, McCone [John A. McCone], Harriman, Rusk or Ball [George W. Ball] (one or the other) Hilsman, and a couple of assistants of those people and Bundy and myself. And the issue really was between the military on the one hand and the State Department on the other. The military position was that if anything was to be done at all, the only military thing that they could suggest was to put into effect SEATO Plan 5. (We had another designation for it, a unilateral version of it, US ONLY OP PLAN something or other. I can't remember the number) This involved putting an indeterminate number of American ground forces into the Mekong Valley and generally into the area up to Luang Prabang in the north, the object being just to hold that territory. The difficulty was that the same argument had taken place in March of the year before; and the military estimates were never the same from one period to the next. One session to the next. It depended really a lot on the circumstances under which you asked the opinion of the JCS. They would tell you that it would take two divisions to do this, some 45,000 people - 2 sort of augmented divisions - when they felt that probably you wouldn't want to do it. But the moment it became apparent it was likely that the President might actually order such a thing, then the estimate would soar up to very large figures - 300,000. Of course the President's constant concern

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about this sort of thing was: How do I ever get them out of there once I get them in? So, he found himself faced with a choice between being unable to take any military action short of a sort of ultimate military action, irreversible and complete military commitment, or just giving up and getting out. So that was the background against which these meetings took place.

KRAFT: Who originally suggested that this was the kind of relevant reply, putting in ground troops - a military response? Was that the State Department position?

FORRESTAL: Yes. It really was. I think that State had run out of political delaying tactics at about the time of Nam Tha. As I say, they really hadn't expected the Communists to do this. And when they did, there didn't seem to be anything else you could do - you could go back to Geneva and complain, but all that

would have done would have been to have ratified the Communist advance on this area, because the normal result of an international conference is a freezing or ratification of the status quo. So the State Department came into these discussions arguing that some military action had to be taken. Their position was that it wouldn't take much. All it would take was a credible indication to Hanoi that the United States was prepared to commit some troops to this, the theory being that once a country commits some part of its military forces, then the implication is that it will back them up. The military argument, especially after their experience in Korea was: not so - we never want to get ourselves in a position where we put in

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a corporal's guard under the U.S. flag, then have them trampled all over, and then have the President of the United States refuse to back them up. That hurts prestige. It lessens the credibility of the American military force. This was never a black and white situation. The President was always aware that the military had a very good argument on their side. But the result of this argument was to leave him in a state of complete paralysis.

(This is one of the amusing sidelights.) General Lemnitzer used to open these meetings by giving a briefing of the military situation. At one meeting in the middle of the week, after Nam Tha, we were discussing with the President the nature of the U.S. military response. JCS had worked very hard the previous few nights trying to gin up a plan they could present to the President. General Lemnitzer was in the process of presenting it to the President that morning. And he came into the Cabinet Room with an enormous map, much too big because it was a map not only of Laos, but also most of the eastern part of China and all the way down to Malaya. He had a pointer. The President came to start the meeting. General Lemnitzer began by stating that the Chiefs had met and that this was what they were going to recommend. He started it by a description of the geography of the area; and at a certain point he said, "Of course, the main line of defense of this particular area is the Mekong River Valley", at which point he pointed to a spot on the map. Roger Hilsman, who was always present at these things and who is the

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kind of man who...it was all he could do to keep himself from interrupting or breaking into a conversation like that, had restrained himself at previous meetings, but at this point he noticed that General Lemnitzer was not pointing at the Mekong River - his eye had left, or he was not looking at, the map. Anyway he was pointing to the Yellow River up in the eastern part of China. Roger got up from the table; he took the pointer from General Lemnitzer's hand and said, "You've got your rivers mixed up. The Mekong is down here. And," he said, "Mr. President, the Mekong River Valley is the most important part of Laos; and this is the plan that should be followed." And Roger began to take over the military briefing. There was a sort of gasp of horror from General Lemnitzer. He stepped back and watched with absolute amazement while this brash civilian from the State Department just moved in on his briefing. The President was smiling (I remember particularly looking at him.) during this whole performance, and he let it go on. Roger must have taken up ten minutes doing, I must say - at least to a civilian anyway - a very convincing explanation of what he thought ought to be done.

This basically was to deploy a small number of American ground forces into positions in Thailand which would suggest formally to the enemy that we were about to go across the river and do all the things that JCS were recommending. But the first move ought to be a small move, a small number of forces up to the Mekong. Well, he finished this, and there was a dead silence in the room. Secretary McNamara said in the driest possible way, "Mr. President, after

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that, I think we might let the Joint Chiefs of Staff go back to their exposition of the military problems involved in this area." And Lemnitzer carried on. But this, I think, was the beginning of Roger's problems with the military. They never quite forgave him for that - that was the beginning of his difficulties with them.

However, at the end of this series of meetings which went on, in effect the President decided to do what Hilsman had suggested, over the grave doubts and worries of the Chiefs. They never disagreed - they never went so far as to formally say they disagreed. There were no votes. They never took a formal position. But they certainly made it clear that they doubted the suggestion was wise. It was late at night when the President said, "We've discussed this thing enough, now we must act." Bundy had by this time gotten most everybody to agree that Marines to Thailand was the thing to do. Then came the execution; and I must say that it wasn't done very well. We had a rather bad time of coordinating Defense, State and the White House in getting instructions out to the various people in the field to do this thing. The Thais were caught badly by surprise; the State Department failed to notify them what we wanted to do; and as a result they didn't hear about it until the Marines were within a few hours of landing in Bangkok. This was very bad diplomacy - it offended their sensibility. After it was done, the President called me up to his office on a Sunday afternoon and did something that he did several times thereafter. You could never be sure whether he really meant it or whether he was just trying to make you

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nervous; but after the decision has already been made and the troops had already been sent, he said, "Mike, do you really think this was a wise thing to do? Don't you think that you people - you, Hilsman, and Harriman, really moved too fast on this one?" This was alone, there was nobody else in the room. He said, "How am I ever going to get them out? Why did you let me put them in without making it quite clear how we're going to get them out?" Well, this of course upset me very much. I went back over to the office and began writing a memorandum about how we were going to get them out. Which again was a way Kennedy had of constantly needling people to try to think ahead, and not just relax and be satisfied that you had gotten something moving. I did think very hard about the problem again and went over to State Department and the Pentagon to talk to more people. Actually, it turned out that the way you got them out was to go into a Geneva Conference again.

KRAFT: This picks up the thread. You say the Communists pulled back?

FORRESTAL: Yes, the Communists reacted very quickly. They were in Ban Houei Sai, and they moved all the way back to Nam Tha. They had captured Nam Tha, they never did move out of that; but they went all the way back to just the vicinity of Nam Tha. They quieted down very quickly. I dare say that this was a very important element in concluding the Geneva Agreements.

KRAFT: It was after the Pthet Lao withdrawal that Phoumi arranged

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with Souvanna and Souphanouvong...

FORRESTAL: Yes. It's interesting to note as a sidelight that while Nam Tha was actually happening, General Phoumi wasn't even in Laos. He was running off on one of his trips all over Asia trying to drum up some diplomatic support for his position. He went to Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, even to Vietnam. When he came back to Laos and after Nam Tha, he saw what had happened. After the Marines had moved into Thailand, he then announced out of the blue that he was agreeable to the Souvanna Phouma compromise.

KRAFT: He then proceeded back to Geneva?

FORRESTAL: Then he went back to Geneva - I think it was late June or early July. And that lasted about three weeks. There the main problem was to persuade the Thai and Vietnamese (who were the major hold-outs on this) to sign the accord. The Thais actually behaved quite well; they made all kinds of public demonstrations, but privately they said, all right. I think that our sending the Marines helped them a lot too. They felt a lot more secure, and they felt that the Rusk-Thanat communique really had some meaning to it, although they were very irritated with us for not having cleared with them beforehand.

KRAFT: What was the Rusk-Thanat communique ?

FORRESTAL: Oh, this was back in early 1962, in possibly January or February. Rusk went out to Bangkok to a SEATO meeting. The Thais were very upset that SEATO had been paralyzed by the French - the French and British actually - in the previous spring, in March. And they had no

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confidence that SEATO was going to protect them. They wanted a direct - ideally a bilateral treaty with the United States - a defense treaty. I think that President Kennedy felt that he couldn't get back to the Senate with that; but what he could do was to have an interpretation made of SEATO which took into account the obligation of each member individually to help the others in the event of a Communist attack on them. That understanding was put into a

communiqué between Thanat and Rusk; but the Thais were never sure that we'd honor the commitment. The Marine move was the first indication we gave that we probably would.

Anyway, we went to the Geneva meeting. Our main problem there was to get Thai and Vietnamese acquiescence. Our second problem - really the one that has given us the most trouble ever since - was to try to get a coalition government in Laos set up a way that it would work. The French in those days were very helpful. They had a man called Jacques Roux (since reassigned somewhere else) and he was in charge of Far Eastern Affairs for the Quai d'Orsay. He was a very tough-minded, strong Frenchman, and he understood exactly what the Communist problems were all about. I must say that if it hadn't been for him, we probably wouldn't have gotten out of that conference, even as well as we did. But he had great influence with Souvanna, who in those days, you remember, we used to think was nearly Communist and a very difficult man to deal with. That was when your friend Zup James was very active. Zup was the only American around who knew Souvanna Phouma; and Harriman used him a lot to find out what Souvann's ideas

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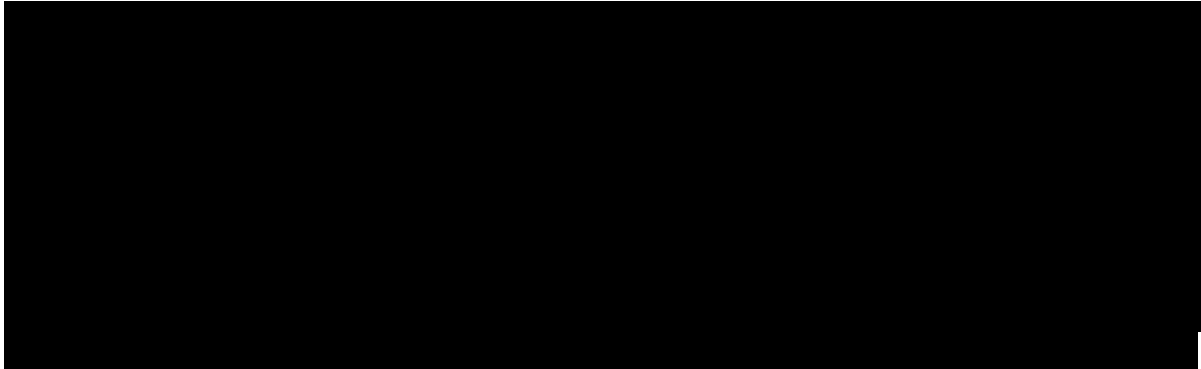
were on one thing and another. But we eventually ended up with probably a bad arrangement for the Lao Government. Phoumi insisted on having a troika - a veto on the part of any of the three tendencies - which has since been the downfall of the coalition government. In looking back on it, if we had trusted Souvanna Phouma more I think we would have insisted that the government be a real government, with the Prime Minister running it. But we didn't trust Souvanna Phouma very much; and we acquiesced on a veto by any member of the coalition. The only occasion that President Kennedy intervened in this particular situation that I can remember was when we had come down to the last wire on the conference. Harriman and Pushkin [Georgi M. Pushkin] had agreed on virtually everything. The Chinese had been backed into a corner by the Russians and finally agreed. The South Vietnamese had not. The Vietnamese Foreign Minister said he just couldn't sign the Geneva Accords, Governor Harriman had tried everything he could think of to persuade the Vietnamese. Messages had gone to the State Department of every sort, out to Saigon to Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.], telling Nolting to really put the screws on Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] and make Diem agree to this thing one way or another. All to no avail. President Diem was one of the most stubborn people in the world. Governor Harriman said, "Well, one last thing. We can get the President to make one last appeal to Diem." He asked me to call Mac, which I did, and asked Mac if the President would be willing to do this; i.e., put his own prestige on the line. Mac called back within half an hour and said, "Yes, anything he can do absolutely. You write the letter." So I wrote the letter -

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a very, very strong one really telling him that this was the kind of thing where we could make or break with him - and sent it back by wire to Mac.

KRAFT: You were in Geneva at this time?

FORRESTAL: Yes. We have ways of getting to the President directly on things like this. I think within 45 minutes the letter came back with a couple of changes that actually toughened it. And I thought I had written a pretty tough letter. The letter was delivered by Nolting the next day, and the Vietnamese agreed. They instructed their Foreign Minister to sign the Agreements. That was on July 22nd. The theory was that the Communists were supposed to withdraw from Laos on October 22nd. I think that's about the end of that story.



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without the personal intervention of the President.

KRAFT: What was McCone's role at the time of the debate on sending troops into Thailand? Did the CIA have a position?

FORRESTAL: Not really - not through the Director. He was I think very quiet - except on one issue - and he is quite consistent on one position. When it looked as though there was a possibility of massive involvement on the ground by American forces, McCone backed off very fast. He was quick to raise the alarm about the Communists moving; but when it came to the crux of having actually to put troops in, McCone would back quite away off and say, "Now wait a minute. You can't win a war in Asia with American ground troops." As I recollect, that was generally his position. He did NOT resist the suggested changes [REDACTED] really quite good about that. All he wanted to know was - Did the President want it? If the President wanted it, then he would make whatever changes necessary. Up to that point he would defend his service the way any officer in the Government does.

KRAFT: I think we might wind this up now.

FORRESTAL: I agree. It would seem the logical point to stop.

(End of second interview - July 28, 1964)

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