

William B. Macomber Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/14/1969
Administrative Information

Creator: William B. Macomber
Interviewer: Dennis J O'Brien
Date of Interview: February 14, 1969
Place of Interview: Washington D.C.
Length: 29 pages

Biographical Note

William B. Macomber (1921-2003) was the Ambassador to Jordan from 1961 to 1963. This interview focuses on Macomber's professional relationship with John F. Kennedy [JFK] while JFK was a senator and the Kennedy administration's foreign policy concerning the Middle East, among other topics.

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Suggested Citation

William B. Macomber, recorded interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, February 14, 1969,
(page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM B. MACOMBER

February 14, 1969

Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, when did you first meet Senator Kennedy?

MACOMBER: I can't recall exactly when I met him, but it was in the early fifties. I remember the first time that I observed him closely, which was before I had met him, was the day he was sworn into the Senate. I was there as the guest of another Senator who was also being sworn in, Senator [Prescott] Bush. But Senator Kennedy took the oath the same day, and I remember looking down from the gallery and being impressed by the fact that so young a man had gotten to the United States Senate. There are a lot of younger people in the United States Senate now, but there weren't very many in those days, and I was struck by the way he handled this business of being on the one hand, a United States Senator, and on the other hand, being conscious that he was a young fellow. I remember thinking he balanced the two. He somehow was not stuffy and did not act beyond his years, and yet he also had the dignity that went with the office that he was being sworn into. It was the first time I really noticed him and how he was handling that rather difficult business of being a very young man in a high office.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have any relationships with him when you were assistant to Senator [John S.] Cooper?

MACOMBER: Yes, we did, although I had more to do with [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen in those days. Cooper was a great friend of Kennedy. They just were simpatico in many ways. They worked together on a number of matters and that brought the offices in contact. I got to know Ted Sorensen in those days, and I worked with him. I can't remember now exactly what the projects were that we worked on. In any event, I really knew his staff better than I knew him. I knew him a little bit, but not really very well. I didn't get to know him until later on when I had come back to the State Department and was handling the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations job.

O'BRIEN: What were your impressions of Sorensen?

MACOMBER: Very able. He was a fellow that could get the job done, who could cut through and get to the heart of the problem.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have anything to do with Myer Feldman?

MACOMBER: I had something to do with him; I have over the years. I don't recall how much I had to do with him in those days. Certainly Ted Sorensen was the key fellow as far as I was concerned. I knew the other fellows, but less well.

O'BRIEN: Well, after you left Senator Cooper's staff, you then went to the State Department, and you were an assistant to Under Secretary [Herbert Jr.] Hoover and also Secretary [John F.] Dulles for a while. Can you recall how the State Department reacted to Senator Kennedy's criticisms of Administration foreign policy?

MACOMBER: You mean during the period when he first launched out on our Algeria policy?

O'BRIEN: Right.

MACOMBER: Yeah, I can remember the reactions rather vividly. The Senator was very critical of our Algerian policy. Mr. Dulles, who actually thought well of Senator Kennedy--I know, that sounds rather condescending now, but you have to remember in that period Senator Kennedy was a young fellow, not the national figure he was to become, and Secretary Dulles was one of the great world figures. But Dulles had thought that Kennedy was a promising young American who could play a constructive role. He thought well of him. But he didn't think too well of this Algerian business because he felt that we were working very hard behind the scenes to bring the kind of outcome that ultimately resulted there and that we could probably accomplish our purposes better by quiet pressure than by publicly denouncing the French policy. That just made it harder to move France. So I remember he was interested in organizing a rebuttal to the Senator's statements.

And there were some counter-statements made on the floor. Thruston Morton, who had very recently left the job as Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, was back up in the Senate, I believe he spoke up that day. At least I remember there was talk about his doing it. I think in the end the fellow that I remember the best who spoke was [Everett M.] Dirksen. I believe there was a series of conversations in which Senator Dirksen was told about the Administration's concern about it. I was not directly involved in any of this, other than as a Special Assistant to the Secretary as this was before I was in the Congressional relations business. But I remember it, and I remember that Senator Dirksen, whom I think was probably at the height of his powers in those days--needed an absolute minimum of briefing on why we felt this was not helpful and was kind of hippodroming a difficult problem and would only set it back rather than help solve it.

In any event, Dirksen got up and made the most effective counter-speech that day. I remember he had a phrase in it in which he said, "These things are often best not accomplished to the accompaniment of brass bands." In other words, it's sometimes better to work quietly on these things. A lot of the more senior Senators in both parties felt the same way, that this was something that was very delicate and you didn't help much by pushing publicly on it. But this viewpoint never backed Senator Kennedy off.

Later, when I dealt with Congressional relations, I was always hoping that he would drop the subject, but he never did. On later occasions, any time Algeria was in the news, he'd get up and remind everybody of what he'd said. And, of course, ultimately his statement on Algeria became a great asset to him in his dealings, not only with Algeria, but with the Arab world, because they remembered him as the fellow that had spoken out so loudly and clearly and hadn't worried too much about French sensibilities and the practicalities of the situation. So his position on Algeria became an asset.

But fundamentally, the State Department front office thought very highly of him. He was a young force in the Senate of the United States who had a future, and he was very well regarded.

O'BRIEN: You don't happen to recall his proposals for settling Mid-East problems. He had a whole series of them he made back in 1957 in a series of speeches.

MACOMBER: Well, I don't remember those in detail. I do remember that he had the feeling--and I would date this a little later--that we ought to be trying a little harder to get at these radical Arab leaders. And he tried, later when he became President, to see if we couldn't go that extra distance a little bit and make the extra effort to work with [Gamal A.] Nasser. He seemed to have the feeling that--I don't know if he had it up to the end of his life, but certainly in his late Senate days and during his early Presidential days he thought that maybe we ought to make at least one more big try to see if we couldn't deal with Nasser on a better basis than we had in the period

that led up to Suez and the post-Suez period.

I think his views toward Nasser were greatly influenced by a meeting he had with him in which he was very much impressed with Nasser personally. My own impression in talking with him was that an awful lot of his views on dealing with Nasser stemmed out of that, in the sense that, you know, "Is this fellow really that difficult to deal with if we make the extra effort?" And I think he always wanted us to at least give it a try.

O'BRIEN: In your contacts with him in your role in working with congressional relations, did he show an understanding of some of the internal difficulties in the State Department?

MACOMBER: Well, he was certainly not a, "a problem." I mean he never just attacked the State Department.

I remember one reason why I thought he was important in these early days. When I was made Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations, one of the first things I did was to call on the Vice President of the United States, who was Mr. [Richard M.] Nixon. I did that both because it was protocol to call on the presiding officer of the Senate but also to talk to him and get some advice on how to do my new job. And I remember we talked for a while, and he gave me a lot of good advice on the kind of people that it was very important to cultivate up on the Hill, and how to go about it. And I remember towards the end of his talk to me on how he would recommend I go about the job, he said, "And there's one other thing I'd like to suggest to you. I'd like to suggest to you that you really get to know this young Jack Kennedy across the hall here." You remember their offices were right across the hall. He said, "Now, of course, he's a Democrat, but he's a pretty good man." And he said, "If you've got a good case and a reasonable story to tell, he's open-minded. And if it's a logical case, he can be persuaded. He'll listen. And if you can get him on your side, he has a lot of weight with the young fellows around here." I remember very distinctly Mr. Nixon saying that.

And I also recall in the early days when I dealt with Senator Kennedy I used to go see him and talk to him about problems and at least at the beginning, on one or two occasions, I remember his saying to me, "Well, what does Dick think about this?" Now, I don't recall him doing that very often and I don't recall him doing it as the fifties wore on toward the 1960 election year, but I do distinctly recall him doing it in the early days when I was on the Congressional liaison job.

O'BRIEN: Did you talk to him in regard to appropriations, and did Senator Kennedy give you support on appropriation matters for State in those years?

MACOMBER: I would strongly suspect he did, but I don't recall. He was head of the African subcommittee, and, of course, Algeria is a part of Africa. But he was broadly interested in all foreign policy issues. He thought about it a lot; he was obviously getting ready to run for President, and foreign policy was a major element. So I dealt with him a lot on foreign policy issues and in any case, he certainly wasn't one of these fellows who was trying to cut up the State Department.

I have heard allegations that the Kennedys have never liked the State Department and that this stemmed from the days when their father was an ambassador and so on. None of that was ever reflected in any conversations I had with him. He wanted factual information; he wanted to know what the professional people thought and why they thought it and what the alternatives were. He was very logical, and was always very relaxed.

I remember one episode with him which left a great impression on me. He wanted to amend the Battle Act, to loosen it up a little bit so that our relationship with Poland would be less restricted than it was under the provisions of the Battle Act. This was a very explosive kind of political issues, but there were quite a few people in and out of the Congress of the United States who agreed that the time had come to do something about this, including a number of Polish-American groups. So it was a cause for which there was considerable support. But there were also great built-in objections to it in both parties, and

particularly in the Republican Party, especially on the part of Senator [William F.] Knowland, the Republican Senate leader. Senator Kennedy wanted to amend the Battle Act by putting an amendment on the foreign aid bill after the latter had passed the House. It would be an amendment that he would try to put on the aid bill on the floor. And then, of course, there would be a Senate-House Conference, and he wanted to try to hold it in conference and amend it that way.

The State Department favored and had already sent up a recommendation that the Battle Act be amended in the way Senator Kennedy wanted. But, of course, amending the Battle Act by tacking the amendment on a completely different bill after that bill had passed the House--and the Battle Act was fundamentally a piece of House legislation, anyway--seemed a real back door way to do it. So we faced a dilemma: We thoroughly agreed with Senator Kennedy's objective, but we had rather grave reservations about the tactics he was using. And we had the additional political problem on our hands, of the Republican leaders and a lot of conservative Senators not wanting to amend the Battle Act at all.

So I worked out the usual sort of unfortunate straddling position that you often have to develop in a situation like this. But the key, I felt, was that whatever our position was, I should say exactly the same thing to Senator Knowland that I said to Senator Kennedy. And what I said was that the Executive Branch was going to stay neutral; that it favored the objective of Senator Kennedy's amendment, but the question of whether this goal should be accomplished by an amendment being hooked to the foreign aid legislation, was something that would have to be left to the judgment of the Senate. I went up and I told this to Senator Knowland, and then I went to Senator Kennedy and repeated it to him. This seemed to be all right with Senator Kennedy. I think he thought he could win with that kind of a hands-off approach by the Administration. And Senator Knowland certainly understood it.

Well, then, just before the issue came up on the floor for a vote, there was a Republican leadership meeting in the White House. And as this issue was coming on the floor that day, Senator Knowland raised it. And President Eisenhower said, "Well, I'm for amending that Battle Act, but I don't think it's right to do it on this aid bill. I just think that's an improper way to do it." Well, that was a very different position than the "hands off" position I had carefully, carefully worked out with the key figures just below the Presidential level in the Executive Branch. It was obviously much more favorable to Knowland's position than the sort of neutral position I had worked out. But it's very hard to tell the president what our policy is when the President's just enunciated it. So I cleared my throat and said, "Mr. President, I think I should make clear what we've been saying on the Hill is that"--and then I repeated our earlier position. President Eisenhower turned to me and said, "Young man, I've just said that."

Well, the President hadn't quite said what I'd said, in fact, and anyway, Senator Knowland understood the distinction. And when he went out and talked to the reporters, he said what the President really said and not what I had earlier said had been the position.

Of course that really undermined Senator Kennedy very badly. And, of course, the only thing I could do was get up there and explain to the Senator what happened. I remember dashing up to the Hill to get to his office. In the meantime it had gotten on the tickers, and I can remember the hostility in the Kennedy outer office when I walked in. I just sat there and cooled my heels for a while. And, they were very sore at me because they really felt, knowing the staffers around me were unhappy. . . . Well, I finally got in to see the Senator, and I just said, "I'm sorry, Senator, the President has taken a new position, and it is not the one I gave you; it is much more favorable to the Knowland position, and I'm very sorry to have to tell you on the morning of the vote that what I told you before wasn't accurate."

Unlike some of the staffers, he was very relaxed. He said, "Well, I know it's not your fault, but thanks for telling me. I read it on the ticker." He wasn't abusive at all about it and was quite understanding. He lost that vote that afternoon by one vote. And obviously, it was the switch by the President that did it. Well, this incident could have made some people angry, but it never had any effect on Senator Kennedy's relations with me. He was enormously graceful and a little detached about such things, believing, I think, that these things happen. On matters of that kind, he carried no grudges around with him.

O'BRIEN: You had a good deal of contact, then, with presidential hopefuls, and for years . . .

MACOMBER: Yes. I think it was one of the most fascinating times to be in this congressional relations job because almost everybody who was running for the presidency was on the Foreign Relations Committee or at least in the Senate. Only [Henry C., Jr.] Lodge wasn't, and he was in the State Department, so it was a time when you knew them all. Now I might say there were quite a few fellows on the Foreign Relations Committee who weren't announced but who also were quiet candidates. And then of course, Senator [Lyndon B.] Johnson was also in the presidential picture, as you know.

I remember that when Senator Kennedy began running harder and harder for the presidency, he was less and less in the Senate. Now he was in the Senate more often than Senator Robert Kennedy was towards the end of his life. But John Kennedy did pull away, to some extent, from the Senate and really began running full-time for office. But he was highly regarded, despite the fact that he was not a full-time, inside member of "the club." People liked his style. Everybody has talked about his style and his grace, and it was certainly a part of him at that time.

In this connection, I remember a story that [Rowland, Jr.] Rowly Evans told about standing and talking with Senator Kennedy when Senator [Richard B.] Russell came by. As Senator Russell walked by, Rowly Evans said, "Hi, Dick!" Senator Kennedy was absolutely shocked. He said, "Why, Rowly!" he said, "do you call him Dick?" And Rowly Evans said, "Of course I do. What do you call him?" Senator Kennedy replied, "Why, I call him Senator."

Well, you know, he had wonderful manners, and he had an instinct for handling people, and he was a respected fellow up there.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any contact in the interim period between election and the Inauguration with the incoming Administration and . . .

MACOMBER: Yes. Yes, I did. Let me tell you one other story about him which has always interested me. Mentioning Rowly Evans reminded me of it. One evening, about a year before the nomination--oh no, less than a year before the nomination; I guess it was maybe in the fall before he was nominated--the Senator, Rowly Evans, and I sat out in the Evans' backyard and talked all one evening. I suppose it was the longest time I ever spent with him; it was several hours. And I remember--it shows you what a prophet I was--I said to him, "Senator, I don't think you're going to be President; I think you're going to be Vice President. I think they're going to shy away from making a Catholic number one, but they won't want to look like they've turned on the Catholics so they're going to want you on the ticket, and you're going to wind up as Vice President. There's going to be tremendous pressure on you, and at your age, you can't turn the Vice Presidency aside. I just don't think you'd be able to do it."

And he said, "Well, I'm just not interested in being Vice President, and I have no intention of accepting the nomination." Then he added, "I suppose it's right that I shouldn't just say flatly, with all the pressures--you're quite right, they'd be very great, and I suppose that you can't guarantee that you won't take it when the pressure is really on. But then he said, "Listen, I'm not going to be Vice President; I'm going to be President. Who's going to stop me? Let's look at the field." And in the most un-egotistical, detached, practical, matter of fact way, he analyzed the race.

It was almost as if an outsider was analyzing all the contenders, including Kennedy, only Kennedy was doing the analyzing, and it was very impressive. He talked about each one of the other people who were being mentioned, and then he talked about several others who weren't being mentioned much but whose names he thought might come up. And he just thought he was stronger than any of them, that he could beat them all. And I remember that after that conversation, I thought, "He is going to be the nominee." That was a wonderful evening.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any contact with people like Brooks Hays or, well, some of the people in the task forces?

MACOMBER: We had an iron-clad rule that the State Department was to be absolutely bipartisan, that the information that was available to one was to be available to all other candidates. And I was a channel for this information. There would have been another types of channels, probably, if there had been a governor, running, but since Kennedy was a Senator, I had a lot of contact with his people. I don't remember having much contact with Brooks Hays at that time, however. But I remember being in touch with Kennedy's office a good deal throughout the campaign--mostly on factual questions such as: What's the situation about such and such?

O'BRIEN: Well, there were some State Department people that went over to the task forces: [Meyer] Rashish, I believe, and [J. Robert] Schaetzel. Did you have any contact with these people?

MACOMBER: No. I don't recall having any. I dealt, basically, with the Senator's office staff and basically on factual information. On some big stories that were in the news they wanted to know what was going on and what the facts were.

O'BRIEN: Did you know anything about the so-called Bowles talent lists or any other lists that were circulated as far as, you know, appointments in the new Administration?

MACOMBER: Well, no, I didn't know. I mean, the lists weren't shown to me. You remember in the interim period [Clark] Clifford was named as kind of the contact point between Administrations, but on foreign policy matters the contact point really continued to be Senator Kennedy's senatorial office and me, or Bowles and me, simply because they had been dealing with me for the last three and a half years. That process just continued, and we had that kind of a two-track contact. I remember that we handled many messages of congratulations from heads of state and helped get people back who were abroad that Kennedy wanted to talk to about appointments. And I remember in one case where there were many rumors circulating to the effect that a very prominent career officer would be named as ambassador to France. And that particular officer came to me and said, "There are reasons why I shouldn't be, and can't be, ambassador to France at this time." I remember passing the word back to them that we wanted career men in some of the important ambassadorships. I think they really worked to bring this about. They wanted to make a career man ambassador to either France, Italy, or one of the big three, and I think they had sort of picked on this fellow to be ambassador to France. So the communication was kind of a two-way street.

I don't remember seeing any of those lists of suggested appointees. I do remember being unhappy about the [G. Mennen] Soapy Williams' appointment and raising hell about it. Chet Bowles had called me frequently requesting factual information. I remember when Soapy Williams' appointment was announced, I called him and just raised the devil. Actually, I later got to know Governor Williams, and he did a good job in this building. He's a nice fellow, and he's got some ability, too. But what I was sore about was that I've always believed that the State Department should be a nonpartisan building and the first appointment was a fellow that was anathema to all Republicans. No matter what brand of Republican you were, Governor Williams' name was a red flag. I remember telling Chet, "They expect you and the [W. Averell] Harrimans and a lot of the people who have been governors of states and prominent politicians to come in here, but you've picked a real red flag, and you ought to make this a nonpartisan Department and not put in people

that are going to be a red flag to all the Republicans in Congress. Chet didn't agree with me and argued back. But the point is we had very free and continuing conversations during that period.

I remember talking to Senator Kennedy once when he called before his Inauguration but after his election. I can't remember what he called about, but I do remember it took me quite a little time to get on the phone because he got in a conversation with my secretary, asked her how she was, and she said she was fine. I remember sitting here waiting to get on the line. He talked to her for half a minute or so. [Laughter]

Earlier in the campaign we had gotten into a row over a thing called "the African airlift." And this again was a situation where Kennedy--it was a little like that business of the Battle Act amendment--had a right to be angered by the way the situation developed. What was happening was there was an effort to get some African students over to this country; there'd been a proposal that had been lying around for a long time. As the campaign began to get underway--this was something that had been pushed on the Administration--and they hadn't agreed to it, and then the word got out that the Kennedy Foundation was going to do it. Well, the Kennedy Foundation really wasn't set up for this kind of thing, and so I'm not sure that they came into this with totally clean hands, either, but the fact is that it appeared that once the word got out that the Kennedys were going to do this, after several years of not doing anything, the Administration suddenly did it.

Hugh Scott got up and made a speech on the floor and said that the Kennedys with their great wealth were trying to outbid the government of the United States for the privilege of taking, or bringing, these African students over here. And Kennedy was sore about that allegation. He was sensitive about being called the "rich man," and the fellow who could outbid the U.S. government. It was a mess because it had become involved in politics.

I remember Senator Kennedy called me on the phone that time about it, and I said, "Well, Senator, all I can do is write a long letter putting the whole facts in there." And he said, "That's all I ask; that's all I ask. Just be darn sure it doesn't look like I tried to outbid the U.S. government, just be sure the time sequence is clear, you know. I'm not asking you to denounce your own Administration, but just be very clear that you don't make it look like the United States government decided to do it and then I tried to outbid them."

But again, while he was disturbed by this incident, he was a lot less disturbed than some other people who were very upset.

O'BRIEN: How did the career service react to some of the Kennedy appointments at the higher levels; well, Secretary [Dean] Rusk and people like George Ball and Chester Bowles?

MACOMBER: Well, I think Rusk was highly respected, so I think the reaction was favorable on that. Bowles, I suppose, was more controversial, but Bowles was considered a fellow with considerable background and I don't remember any great criticism of that appointment. George Ball was much less well known, so that I don't recall they had much reaction one way or the other.

Bowles, incidentally, fought pretty hard to protect the integrity of the Career Foreign Service. One of the later charges against him was that the Foreign Service didn't like him much. Well, that was pretty unfair because I was close to him when they were trying to appoint political people to jobs, and he tried very hard to be sure that in the level of political appointees, the standard was kept high and, furthermore, that the Department wasn't inundated with political appointees and that the career Service got its share of the appointments.

O'BRIEN: Well, when you were appointed Ambassador to Jordan, do you know where the suggestion for that appointment came from?

MACOMBER: I understand there was a task force of young fellows picking over names and that my name came out of that. I don't know much about that. President Kennedy had talked with me a little bit about staying on. He wanted to keep a few Republicans. He knew that the Republicans had two prominent Democratic ambassadors; we had David Bruce in Germany, and we had Ellsworth Bunker in India. And he felt and so did Bowles, who had a considerable voice in most of these things, that this was a policy that should be continued. And just because I'd been thrown into contact with him, I was one of the Republicans he had in mind.

He toyed with the idea of keeping me in the job as Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations. I thought this was a poor idea because I thought the job should have a new face when the Administration changed. Later, he decided to send me abroad as an ambassador. So I assume what happened was he put my name on a list and then asked the group to work out the name of the country. I had told him that I would be glad to go out as an Ambassador provided it was a real working job, a real front-line kind of post, but otherwise I couldn't because it would just look like I was getting paid off for services rendered rather than being given a difficult job of work to do.

O'BRIEN: Well, did you have a choice of alternate assignments, as far as ambassadorships, or did you . . .

MACOMBER: Well, no. The first one that was offered to me was one I was delighted to get. I felt very honored to be sent to Jordan, which is a small country but it's a real powder-keg.

O'BRIEN: Was there any opposition to your appointment, that you recall?

MACOMBER: I've heard a story that he was a little worried about what some of the liberal Democrats would think. And one day--I heard the story that Chet Bowles walked into the office and said, "You know, there's one young Republican we ought to keep. It's this fellow Macomber." Later, President Kennedy told [Charles ^{Telford} Bartlett, "I wanted to keep him, and when a liberal Democrat walked and said we ought to keep him, I decided to do it."

I never had heard of any opposition, but, you know, maybe I wouldn't have. I think the principle of keeping a few people of the other Party was pretty well established.

O'BRIEN: Well, taking the ambassadorship to Jordan, was this the first time . . .

MACOMBER: Incidentally, I might say one thing before we get to that that I think is interesting. I remember going up to see him with Douglas Dillon (speaking about Republicans who were kept) during that session, which, you may recall, the Congress had after the nomination . . .

O'BRIEN: Right.

MACOMBER: . . . and before the campaign really got under way. It was a very frustrating kind of session; they didn't get much done. Senator Kennedy had an office which is where the Majority Leader's office is now. There's a plaque up there. Every time I go up to see Senator [Michael J.] Mansfield I see this plaque hanging over his couch. It was just days after Senator Kennedy had been nominated. This office was right off the revolving doors on the second floor of the Capitol building over on the Senate side. We went in and talked to him about what was really to turn out to be the Alianza. We wanted to go ahead with the initial moves of creating the Alianza that fall, but obviously, we wanted to check it out with the two Presidential candidates.

And I remember his reaction to that was, "I don't know. It would seem to me that whether Dick wins or whether I win that it would be better to wait and do this thing at the start of the new Administration. But, if you've got to make these preliminary moves now, and you tell me it's a matter of national interest, obviously, I'll go along." So he gave us the okay to go along, and then, I remember, he turned to other matters.

It was the only time in all the years that I dealt with him--and I wouldn't want to suggest I was an intimate of his, but I did see him and observe him--a lot, it was the only time in all the years that I saw him that he did not seem to be completely composed and completely cool and calm; much cooler and calmer and more detached than anybody around him. In that room, you're sort of bottled up in kind of a cave. At that point he was a little behind, as I recall, in the opinion polls, and he seemed to feel like a trapped tiger there, as if he couldn't get out of the cage and get going, and he was pacing, really. I remember him saying, "I don't know what Dick thinks, but I don't think this session is doing anybody any good. And I wish they'd get it over, and we'd get on with this campaign." That was the only time I ever saw him when he appeared to be agitated.

I'll tell you one more story about him; this is Senator Cooper's story. I could never release it unless Senator Cooper said okay, but it tells you a little bit about him. I think President Kennedy was a great man. He was a man of our generation. I don't know anybody who has spoken better for our generation, and I say that as a Republican. For my age group, he was terrific.

But you've got to remember in those days he still was young, too. And, every now and then, despite his maturity, you would see the youngness coming through. I remember running into Senator Cooper, and Senator Cooper looked rather old and tired and discouraged. And I said, "How are you, Senator? What's the matter?" He said, "Well, I had kind of a funny experience today. Jack Kennedy came up and spoke to me, and he said, 'John, what does it feel like to be old?'" And for Senator Cooper, who had always run in Kentucky as the "young Senator," it came as quite a jolt that to Jack Kennedy, Cooper was a much older man, his "older" friend. But, anyway, Cooper realized that Kennedy was quite serious, so he said, "Jack, I don't seem to feel very much different than I've always felt." And Senator Kennedy said, "Well, John, I just wanted to ask you. I'm forty years old today, and I'm feeling kind of blue." But I can tell you, he wasn't feeling half as blue as Cooper was after that conversation. [Laughter]

O'BRIEN: Was this the first time that you had dealt with Middle East affairs? Had you dealt with them while you were . . .

MACOMBER: I had been with Secretary Dulles through the whole Suez crisis, and the Near East was one of the most volatile and active areas of the world during the period I served as his Special Assistant. And then when I was his Assistant Secretary, again, we had the Lebanese landings; we had enormous activity out there. When I was Secretary Dulles' aide, I was the coordinator of the U.S. delegation to the Suez conferences, and later, when I was in the Congressional liaison job, I ran daily briefings open to all members of the Senate and House when the Lebanese landing came. So I'd been involved very deeply from the Washington end in these problems, but had never served out there.

So I had some background. I had some particularly intimate background with Jordan. I was delighted to go there because it was a country that had come awful near to falling apart in the late fifties, and it was one of the areas where steadfastness, both by the leadership of Jordan and by Jordan's friends, including the United States, had pulled it through. I was well aware of how delicate the situation was, and I was very honored to go there.

O'BRIEN: Who briefed you in the White House and the State Department when you went to Jordan?

MACOMBER: They wanted me to brief the new nominees before they went up to their hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. So I stayed in this job for a little while and briefed most of the new team before they went up for their hearings. Then I left, and Brooks Hays came in.

Then I started being briefed for the Jordan job, and that was largely done by the Jordan desk here in the Department, although I went through the standard briefings given to any ambassador by other interested elements of the U.S. government. These briefings culminate with a meeting with the President before you go out.

O'BRIEN: Well, most of the ambassadors to the Mid-East who were appointed in 1961 were career Service people, as I recall.

MACOMBER: Yes, that's right. I think John Badeau and I were the only non-career people appointed, but Badeau had many years of experience in that area.

O'BRIEN: How did the Service react to these? Was this . . .

MACOMBER: I heard a little crack about, "Isn't it too bad about Jordan, which has always had a career man. . . . This is the first time they are not sending a career man to Jordan." But I don't think that was very serious. The career people are not all that unhappy about political appointees. They expect a certain number of them. I mean, I don't know any career officer who doesn't

think that ambassadors like David Bruce and Ellsworth Bunker rank as high as the best the career Foreign Service ever produced. The career officers are not too unhappy if non-career people have some experience.

O'BRIEN: They were highly qualified people.

MACOMBER: Yes, and President Kennedy made a real effort. Most of his appointments were people who did have some background. I used to claim most of the New Frontier was the "old, old Frontier," starting with Mr. Rusk. Most of them were men who had had experience before in their younger days.

O'BRIEN: Did you have regional meetings?

MACOMBER: Yes. Yes, we did. Bowles ran one in Cyprus while he was still Under Secretary. That was a rather extraordinary greeting. They not only had all the ambassadors, but they had all the heads of the AID [Agency for International Development] mission, the military attaches, and the information chiefs. Pretty nearly the whole country team of every embassy came.

And then the Assistant Secretary would also have regional meetings once a year, so we had them fairly regularly.

O'BRIEN: What problems did you inherit in Jordan when you became Ambassador?

MACOMBER: Well, the

O'BRIEN: Or the major ones, I should say.

MACOMBER: The major ones. . . . The fundamental problem of Jordan, and the fact that made it important to the United States was that it was a buffer

state with a moderate government sitting right in the center of the eastern Arab-Israeli world. And it had the greatest long common border with Israel. If Jordan were to collapse, it was almost inevitable that it would produce an Arab-Israeli war, not that people coveted much of Jordan, but no country wanted to see any other country get it. The Arabs, particularly, did not want to see Israel take over the rest of the west bank, and certainly the Israelis did not want some radical Arab state to take over that territory which was right at their innards. And so it was important from the point of view of peace in that area to keep Jordan stable.

Also, I think it is important to the United States to have moderate, evolutionary leaders rather than revolutionary, radical leaders, succeed. Hussein did believe in evolution rather than revolution, in moderation, and in progress. I always felt that in the long run we could have better rapport with Arab leaders who were moderates and evolutionists than we could with the radicals. So there was an added reason to try to help the moderate regime in Jordan succeed.

Now the only way they could succeed in the long run was doing a good job for their country. And the fact is, if you look at the Arab world today, it's the moderates that have done a better job. Moderate government in Beirut has helped bring progress and a decent life to a country with no natural assets at all except its people. Jordan's the same way; whereas Iraq and Syria, ever since they tipped over the more moderate governments they used to have, have floundered, even though they have much great wealth in natural resources than Lebanon and Jordan. So, there was this hope that, while not putting all your eggs in one basket, we could try to support moderation out there.

But the real objective in Jordan was to keep this center from collapsing. It was a race against time. Jordan was a terribly poor country, and the whole question was whether you could elevate the human condition in Jordan, if you could get the economy moving with self help and outside aid in order to increase the living standard to a point where the people of Jordan would be wholeheartedly behind the kind of regime they had. The army supported the King, so he had a little time, as long as the army stayed loyal. But that was no long-term way to remain in power. The long-term way was to do a good job for his people.

So, the job out there was to try to stabilize this center, which, if it collapsed, would produce an Arab-Israeli war. Now that's why that place is so important, and it still is.

O'BRIEN: Was a part of this, perhaps, the encouragement of political reforms in Jordan; for example, the allowing of political parties?

MACOMBER: Yes. Oh, yes. Now we're getting into areas where I would have to be very careful what to discuss. But one of the main problems there, of course, was corruption, but you always have this problem. The Shah [Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi] has the same problem in Iran, where some of his principal supporters have also been on the take. And you've got the problem of how do you break away from the people that have been loyal to you and try to make a pitch for the support of the newer elements who are not particularly loyal but are less corrupt.

Jordan had the added problem of all these Palestinian refugees. This Sirhan Sirhan fellow--there were a lot of that type that had come into Jordan after the Arab-Israeli War [of 1956]¹⁹⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹, who were trying to kill Hussein. One of the main jobs we had out there was to keep Hussein alive and to keep moderate government moving ahead. But the only way it was going to succeed in the long run was by bringing more democratic government, by getting the economy going, and this was the job. I used to feel that every part of the Embassy there really was buying time for the AID mission to get the job done.

It was a fascinating assignment because I was working for a young President and dealing with a young King. There was a great difference in the responsibilities the two men carried, but it was a fascinating experience. I think the young King felt a rapport with the president, a sympathy for the President, and vice versa. I think President Kennedy had an understanding of a young, beleaguered fellow out there, struggling with a different kind of problem. There was a rapport between them.

O'BRIEN: Right. Oh, one thing in regard to discussing some of these things: The people that are involved in this project do have security clearances, and they will be kept . . .

MACOMBER: It's just that I can't talk publicly about corruption in Jordan.

O'BRIEN: Right. Yeah, I understand.

Israel increased its request for arms about the same time you went to Jordan and subsequently received Hawk missiles--I believe it was 1962. What was the reaction in Jordan to this?

MACOMBER: Well, two thirds of Jordan's population are Palestinians, so they're always agitated about anything affecting Israel. The Arabs have a lot of fine qualities, but one of their less attractive qualities is they never blame themselves for anything. It's always somebody else's fault. And the creation of the state of Israel is largely blamed on American and Western support. So they were always irritated, all the time, with the American association with Israel. And whenever we did anything specific, there would be a terrific flare-up.

Now, one of the problems that I had while I was Ambassador there, which I talked to the President about and which he understood, involved Nasser. The President, as I have indicated, had the idea that maybe if we could go that extra mile with Nasser that we might be able to stabilize things out there a little bit, and that it was at least worth a try. Now, the Palestinians were very upset with anything we did for Israel, and that always created problems. But I had the other problem of the more conservative elements that were running the country of Jordan who were terribly opposed to Nasser. And so we not only had the problem which arose whenever we helped Israel--and the Jordanians always exaggerated what we were doing for Israel--but also their reaction to our efforts to improve our relations with Nasser which were going on during that period. We were trying to give him a stake in having good relations with us and, to persuade him to think twice before he did things that would antagonize the Americans.

That whole effort involved an increase in aid, particularly an increase in wheat. And this upset Hussein enormously, as well as a great many leaders of other countries all around the Mediterranean basin, who were opposed to Nasser. Thus, one of my constant problems was trying to persuade Hussein that we weren't shifting our support away from Jordan to the man who was trying to do away with Jordan's regime.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember Myer Feldman's visit to Israel? I believe it was 1962, again. Did you get any backlash on this?

MACOMBER: Yes. The Arab world is constantly stirred up by our support of Israel. They're stirred up about it even when we aren't doing much, and if there's a high level emissary, they get especially stirred up. They tend to forget that, after all, Jordan received the highest U.S. aid contribution per capita of any nation in the world when I was there. I kept emphasizing that.

There was a great deal of evidence to cite to the King to demonstrate our friendship with Jordan, but he was very uneasy about our relationship with Nasser. And I remember talking very frankly with the President about this when I was back here--it was the first of two meetings I had with him on visits to Washington while I was Ambassador--I remember talking to him about it, and he said, "Well, look, tell the King that I don't know if this thing's going to work, but if it does work, he'll be one of the principal beneficiaries of it. If we can gain real influence in Cairo, obviously Jordan and the regime in Jordan and the moderate government in Jordan, whose survival we want will be principal beneficiaries. Tell the King that I don't know whether it'll work or not, but if it does work he stands to gain as much as anybody from it."

O'BRIEN: Was this your 1962 visit?

MACOMBER: Yes, it was the first of the two meetings.

O'BRIEN: You had a rather long meeting with him that time. Do you recall any of the other problems that you might have discussed at that time?

MACOMBER: Well, I remember saying to him, in effect, "Mr. President, it's a little country, and you're awful busy, and there're just a few key things you really ought to know as President of the United States about this country." And I brought him up to date. We were involved then in a great reform movement out there, bringing in an honest young government. It was a very exciting time, popular support was increasing for the regime.

I told the President about this, but also of the kind of things that could go wrong and the kind of things that would have to happen before he personally would be involved. I did not predict that they would happen; but nevertheless, forewarned him that there was a chain of events that could occur which might lead to involvement by the President. I told him what was going on currently. I really wanted him to have a feel of what was going on because it was a good story. But fundamentally, I wanted him to know just a very few essential things that the president of the United States, who has to have so much other information crammed in his head, should know.

He listened very carefully. He asked me only a few questions that time and let me do most of the talking. We were interrupted a couple of times by phone calls from the Hill, so it wasn't quite as long a meeting as it may have sounded.

I remember at the very end he said, "Okay, now, is that all that you want to get across to me?" And I said, "Yes sir, it is." And I said, "Have you any more questions, Mr. President?" It had been a pretty serious meeting up to that time. He said, "Yes, I've got one more question: When are you going to get married?" [Laughter] The King had just gotten married, and I said that I didn't know when I was going to get married. He said, "Isn't that a real handicap?" And I said no, it really wasn't much of one. He continued to grill me on the marriage question. He was interested in the fact that the King had just gotten married, and he wondered what the new wife of the King was like. The meeting ended on this jocular note.

And that was that first meeting. The second meeting about a year later was . . .

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

MACOMBER: It was the same day as one of the first major civil rights marches, which was going to come up Constitution Avenue and go to the Lincoln Memorial. The march was going to start soon after the beginning of my appointment with him, and I remember thinking, "He's going to be getting out of his chair and going over and looking out the window all the time." But he didn't; he was very relaxed. We'd had trouble in Jordan in the intervening period, and he had to focus on some of the things that we had talked about during our previous meeting.

O'BRIEN: That was the Yemen crisis, wasn't it?

MACOMBER: Yes, things had gotten a little unstable there, and the King had had to use his ultimate weapon, which was to put his troops into the streets to keep things in control. Compared to the '68 crisis, the '58 crisis, the '56 crisis, the '57 crisis, and some of the crises we've had lately in Jordan, I would say it was a minor crisis. But it was serious enough and had all the portents of what had happened in the fifties and what happened later in the late sixties. Suddenly it was clear that it might also be happening while he was President.

So we picked up our conversation pretty much from where we had had it before. I felt the questioning was more penetrating this time, and certainly that he realized what trouble Jordan could get us all into. But, as a matter of fact, we had lived through the most recent crisis all right, and I remember complaining to him about the way the U.S. government had reacted. In about a week--maybe eight, ten days--the crisis had been over. But just as it was ending, just as the King had really licked the problem and things were getting back to normal, I discovered that the American 6th Fleet was steaming down the Mediterranean as a big show of support. Nobody had checked with me. And I was fairly irritated that they'd made a move like this without checking with the man on the scene.

So I had a complaint to take up with the President, and I said, in effect that the King is delighted with the support he has received, and it's important to have support, and some day we may have to make a terribly difficult decision about how far that support will go but we should not throw it around when he does not need it. He had this crisis licked, and it just was not helpful to look like he needed the American fleet steaming down to save him when he had done it himself. The President got the point and as I was leaving he said with a grin, "All right. The next time we have a crisis in Jordan, we'll wait for the Macomber solution."

O'BRIEN: Well, this was the 1962 crisis or the '63 one when . . .

MACOMBER: No, this was the '63 one.

O'BRIEN: The '63 one.

MACOMBER: This was my second meeting with him, and I was complaining that we had overreacted. That was the last time I saw him.

The last indirect dealing I had with him was when it was proposed that I come back to run the Near East-South Asia Division of AID. He approved that appointment shortly before he died.

O'BRIEN: Well, the Yemen crisis brought about a major division, didn't it, within the State Department and White House people, as far as policy.

MACOMBER: It brought about a major division between me and the State Department; I don't know where the White House was. I was very unhappy that we recognized the Nasser supported rebel group in the Yemen. But that was a "battle long ago" with the arguments pro and con well documented in the contemporary exchange of telegrams I had with the Department, and there is no point in rehashing it all again here.

O'BRIEN: This really reflects more of a long-term attitude towards Nasser . . . Is there an assumption here that runs through, perhaps, the policy-makers in Washington and even, perhaps, ambassadors that Nasser was a wave of the future?

MACOMBER: There may have been some of that, in some quarters. In any event, my position had always been that this was wrong; that if you looked at the record, the moderates were doing a better job economically and in other ways than the radicals; that moderation in the long run fits the Arab personality. I didn't think moderation was a dead issue. I thought the moderate regimes, if we supported them, had a fighting chance to survive and ultimately have much greater influence in the Arab world, and that our policy should be designed to make the odds as favorable as possible not only for their survival--but for their progress.

On the other hand, I never felt that we should put all our eggs in the moderate basket, because that was much too fragile a basket. I therefore felt that we had to keep our lines in with all the elements in the Arab world. But as I say, I thought we should always try to strengthen the odds in favor of the moderate regimes survival because, if they survived, I thought the Arab world would be a happier place for the Arabs themselves. I also had concluded that the U.S. could have a natural rapport with moderate regimes that it was unlikely to enjoy with the more radical ones. I also felt an Arab world led by moderate regimes was more likely, ultimately, to agree to a viable Arab-Israel peace. The argument on the other side, which I did not agree with, was that we did not have a choice, that the moderate regimes were bound to fail and that we should recognize this and do all we could to ingratiate ourselves with, and gain influence, with the more radical regimes, and we should not allow this effort to be seriously inhibited by our ties with the moderate regimes.

This was basic argument that went on over our Arab policy throughout the Kennedy years. But of course I have over simplified it. No one felt we should not make some effort to improve our relations with Nasser and other radical leaders, and no one felt we should simply turn our back on our moderate friends. But people's reaction to a whole series of specific decisions--recognition of the Yemen Republic, aid levels for Egypt, aid levels for Jordan, and so on--were influenced by where they stood on this more fundamental argument.