

Charles W. Yost Oral History Interview –JFK #1, 10/23/1978
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Yost, Charles W.; Deputy Representative to the United Nations (1961-1966). Yost discusses Adlai Stevenson's ambassadorial role with the United Nations during John F. Kennedy's [JFK] presidency. He discusses Stevenson's reactions to issues such as the Bay of Pigs operation, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War. Yost also describes his own responsibilities with the United Nations, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

CHARLES W. YOST

October 23, 1978
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don't we begin with the background of your appointment to the UN. I know that Ambassador Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] pretty much chose his own staff.

YOST: Yes he did. I had been ambassador to Morocco and was home on leave at the time of the change in administration. Frankly, having been two and a half years in Morocco I was rather hoping to get a post at home in the new administration. I knew Chester Bowles slightly and he later told me that he'd proposed to nominate me or suggest me for Assistant Secretary for the Middle East but that Stevenson had preempted and as you say, the administration's position was that they wanted to keep Adlai happy and anything he asked for within reason why they would give him. And I

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had known him also fairly slightly. I had been one of the staff of the delegation to the General Assembly back in 1946.

STERN: In San Francisco?

YOST: No.

STERN: Oh.

YOST: No, I had been in San Francisco as well but there I'd barely met him. At the General Assembly in forty-six at Lake Success I had known him a little better.

STERN: Oh, I see. The first General Assembly.

YOST: And, then he had visited posts where I had been and so he knew me and I knew him. I think as a matter of fact it was Hamilton Fish Armstrong who suggested me for this particular position. Anyway, he asked me to drop in and see him at the Georgetown house where he was visiting. And he offered me the job.

STERN: Yes. Did you know the President? Did you know President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] at all?

YOST: Well, I knew him slightly, that is, I'd had dinner with him the previous time I was home, at Claiborne Pell's house so I had met him and talked with him.

STERN: This was while he was a senator?

YOST: While he was a senator.

STERN: Right. I see. I suppose the really major question about Ambassador Stevenson at the UN, of course there's been a lot about it recently since the

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publication of the second volume of John Bartlow Martin's biography, is the degree to which Ambassador Stevenson was happy at the UN, if that's quite the right word to use. And I'd like to get your insights into his relationship with the White House, with the President, Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk], and then with Harlan Cleveland and all of the major contacts in Washington.

YOST: Well, I, while he never said so to me, I suspect he would have liked to have been appointed Secretary of State. He had a very deep interest in foreign affairs. He had done a great deal of travelling about ever since he, travelling abroad ever since he ran for president in fifty-two. And I personally regretted he wasn't appointed Secretary of State. Some of the errors of the Kennedy administration would have been avoided or at least might have been avoided.

STERN: Can you elaborate what you mean by that?

YOST: Well, I'm quite sure he would have stood, he would have strongly opposed the Bay of Pigs operation which might well have been prevented if he had done so. And I think he would have opposed as much involvement in Vietnam -- the escalation which, of course, was no where nearly as great as later under Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] but still there was an escalation under Kennedy and I think

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he would have opposed that. Now whether successfully, I don't know. On the other hand, the two personalities, as you know, were very different.

STERN: Right.

YOST: And they never were completely comfortable with each other. Adlai, while his reputation for indecision is unjustified in my opinion, had a way of orally weighing both sides of an issue. That was his way of....

STERN: You feel he articulated his....

YOST: ...being sure that he was seeing all sides of it before he made up his mind, though sometimes he had made up his mind before he went through the process. One could see which way he was going to end up but nevertheless he had a way of doing that at some length and Kennedy was impatient with that. He wanted a crisp, quick statement of the issues and a recommendation.

STERN: Were you ever with them together?

YOST: Oh, yes. Quite often.

STERN: Could you describe any example of the way they related?

YOST: Well, I can't recall a particular issue but I was at a number of meetings a few in which just the two of them -- maybe one or two others -- more often in larger groups in which we were talking about the Congo or various other issues that were up at the UN. So, I had a chance often to see them

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together and, while they had and showed respect, respect for each other, nevertheless you could see it didn't quite click, the relationship. Which was unfortunate but natural and not the fault of either one of them. It was simply that they were different personalities and had different ways of acting. So it is possible that, even had Adlai been named Secretary of State that it wouldn't have worked too well after a while.

STERN: There are those who suggest that Kennedy perceived that and that's precisely why he didn't name him the Secretary of State.

YOST: Yes, well, could well be. Yes. But still, it would have been better for him had he done so. And, submitted himself to the minor inconvenience of having to hear Adlai wrestle with a problem in this way.

STERN: Right. Did...?

YOST: As to getting along with the White House, of course, most of the day to day operation doesn't involve the President. And it is done -- I'm speaking of the mission at the UN -- the larger part is done either by telephone or by personal meetings in Washington or New York between the Chief of the US-UN and his principal assistants and the relevant people in the State Department,

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which are primarily the Secretary, Under Secretary and the Assistant Secretary for IO's [International Organization Affairs] which was Harlan Cleveland. Also, Kennedy designated Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] as the White House contact for the mission. And so there were many phone calls with him and he was often up in New York. So I would say that for the day to day business it was mainly Harlan Cleveland and Arthur Schlesinger that we dealt with.

STERN: And Cleveland had been Stevenson's choice for the IO position as I recall.

YOST: I'm not really sure of that. I don't know whether he suggested him or Rusk did or just how it came about.

STERN: How did you perceive the relationship between Stevenson and Rusk?

YOST: Well, it was, it was reasonably good. Once again they didn't really.... While Rusk and Kennedy are very different personalities, in a sense the relationship between Stevenson and Rusk was like that between Stevenson and Kennedy in that they're very different personalities and they have a different approach to problems.

STERN: Do you think a lot of it had to do with the fact that Stevenson felt that he should have been Secretary of State?

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YOST: No, I don't.

STERN: You don't.

YOST: No, I don't think so. He wasn't in any sense a petty sort of person. No, it was basically he felt Rusk was too much of a hard liner and didn't, didn't adequately consider what he would have felt to be broader aspects of problems rather than just the, the cold war confrontation aspect. But, again on the day to day business they got along well and there weren't major confrontations between them.

STERN: Did Stevenson feel that he had a reasonable degree of freedom at the UN? I remember seeing a quote that, something to the effect that he felt he was on the phone so often with Washington that they were watching virtually every word he said or wrote or spoke. He quipped about that.

YOST: Yes. Well, that, that's a perennial complaint of ambassadors up there. They're... due to the ease of communication -- and it can be very annoying really. People in Washington watching the TV of a debate and calling up somebody and saying "Pass a note to Stevenson or whoever and get him to put this point in." That doesn't happen very often but it does occasionally and it is annoying. I don't think... I think Stevenson probably had more

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discretion than other because of his prestige.

STERN: Right.

YOST: And of course this very close scrutiny applies only to white hot issues not the average issue. Normally the way a position is, was usually worked out would be that the US-UN would draft a statement, either a statement to be given or a statement of a position we thought should be followed. And that would be sent down to Washington and they would quite often make important changes in it or sometimes they'd total it. It would go back and forth several times in very much the same way as a speech on foreign policy is negotiated between the State Department and the White House.

STERN: Right. Did Ambassador Stevenson and the US-UN then have a considerable degree of latitude on the minor, the lesser issues?

YOST: Yes, and, as I say, even on the major issues they usually would present the first draft of a position.

STERN: I know that many..... There are those who argue, for example, particularly in the Congo crisis that Stevenson really made policy. He was a major participant.

YOST: Well, I think he did. I think he did. He was a major participant on almost everything. The Bay of Pigs was an exception. But particularly after

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that when Kennedy perceived the very embarrassing position that he'd been put in he was I think consulted closely and involved in every important matter affected the UN.

STERN: On the Bay of Pigs, I seem to recall having seen a reference to the fact that you were present during this briefing....

YOST: Yes.

STERN: ...that Stevenson got from I think it was Arthur Schlesinger and a man from the CIA whose name eludes me at the moment. [Tracy Barnes]

YOST: Yes. I don't remember Schlesinger being at that meeting. Maybe he was. In any case, there was a briefing from a CIA type which, the details of which I don't recall, but which obviously didn't convey what was really going to happen. Just pieces of it which fitted in with the cover story which Stevenson presented to the committee.

STERN: One reporter, a UN reporter, Richard Walton, said that you had been very suspicious of the cover story from the start. That, having been an ambassador and having had experience with what Walton calls the clumsy tricks of the CIA, you just, the thing just didn't smell right to you. But that you were...since you had no direct evidence, you didn't really say anything.

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YOST: Well, that is the case. I regretted later I didn't say more. I did say a little but I Well, I had....

STERN: Can you recall any specifics of how Stevenson reacted once he realized that he had been caught showing those photographs?

YOST: Oh, he was furious! And he seriously considered resigning. His first reaction was that his usefulness had ended there, that he had destroyed his credibility! We, of course, and the people in Washington assured him that his great prestige and credibility wouldn't be destroyed by one episode and an episode that was quite clear to everybody he wasn't responsible for. He, like everybody else, had been deceived so, after a day or two, why, he calmed down.

STERN: Did you ever discuss the operation itself with him? Did he ever specifically say anything about why he thought it had happened?

YOST: Why he...?

STERN: Why he thought it had happened? About his feelings about President Kennedy's decisions to go with the operation? I think some sources I've seen indicate that he thought that it demonstrated a kind of impulsiveness and immaturity on Kennedy's part.

YOST: I, really, I would suppose that we did have a post mortem about it but I frankly don't recall what he said nor do I... I certainly don't

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recall that he took that position. I know that my, my own feeling was -- which may have, may or may not have also reflected his was that... Kennedy had merely been caught up in the momentum of something already well under way which he feared for political reasons to kill. He would have been accused of being soft and losing a great opportunity to get rid of Castro [Fidel Castro.] It had been oversold And I have since argued in a number of my writings that this was an example of two few people being consulted including the people who knew most about Cuba.

STERN: Yes. I know you made the point there. I think you said that it was the worst conceivable example of how to make a decision in foreign policy, since the people who were asked were precisely those people who really didn't know.

YOST: Except for the people who had a vested interest in the operation going ahead.

STERN: That's right. Is it true that he was so affected by the episode concerning the photographs that he literally had to be forced to show the photographs in sixty-two at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

YOST: No, no, no.

STERN: George Plimpton says that it was almost a matter

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of, almost physical force to get him to use them. He was so afraid.

YOST: Nonsense!

STERN: Really, well, that's interesting. That's what Plimpton says in an interview that

Stevenson was so concerned that the photos might be faked again.

YOST: George Plimpton?

STERN: Yes.

YOST: He was interviewed with what?

STERN: With the Kennedy Library, for this project.

YOST: What did George know about it? He was just a... young kid at that time and he had no contact with him.

STERN: Did I say George?

YOST: Yes.

STERN: Francis! I mean Francis! [Francis T. P. Plimpton]

YOST: Oh, you mean Francis! You mean Francis.

STERN: Yes, I mean Francis. I'm sorry. Of Course, Francis.

YOST: Well, I'm very surprised if he said that. I never was exposed to any reluctance on his part because of course the presentation of the photographs occurred several days after we first became aware of what was happening. And, unlike the Bay of Pigs, of course, as you know, Stevenson did participate in all these debates in the White House as to what to do. And he had become thoroughly convinced that these were genuine. There was no question in his

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mind, I thought, by the time the Security Council meeting rolled around that these were genuine. In fact, my impression was that he was delighted to show them...

STERN: Isn't' that odd because Francis Plimpton says virtually the opposite. He said that Stevenson had expressed in the hall before the photos were brought in extreme reluctance to show them for fear that they might be frauds again.

[Laughter]

YOST: Well, I do think I was a little closer to that particular thing than Francis became, as you know, we were both deputies and we rather divided issues among us. He, for example, all through this period was responsible for the Middle East. I later became much involved in that not in my Stevenson years. Whereas I, just

by chance, was responsible for the Cuban issue and the Congo. So I do think that perhaps I was a little closer to Stevenson on that particular subject than Francis was.

STERN: Did you ever have any discussion with him after that, shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, when that article by Bartlett [Charles L. Bartlett] and Alsop [Stewart J.O. Alsop]...?

STERN: Oh, yes, again he was perfectly furious at... and again, I think, seriously considered resigning. The President had to work quite hard to reassure him that he strongly disapproved of this article and strongly supported Stevenson and that he wanted him

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to stay and... so on and so on.

STERN: Did he ever express to you any of his own conclusions as to where the material had come from and who he thought might have leaked it?

YOST: Well, he was... it was obvious that the material came out of the White House somewhere.

STERN: Yes, it is.

YOST: And, I don't remember his specifically trying to pinpoint where it came from but...

STERN: Martin seems to indicate that he could never quite overcome the suspicion that it was the President.

YOST: Maybe, I don't know. But he didn't say that to me. Bobby's [Robert F. Kennedy's] name was mentioned too, I think by Stevenson.

STERN: That strikes me as more likely.

YOST: Yes. Well, anyway he felt it extremely unfair. The issue, as I recall, the principle issue was whether we should have offered to pull out the missiles, our missiles in Turkey. And, of course, his... this was put forward as... all kinds of suggestions were being put forward. I don't know how hard he pushed it but of course, as you know, Kennedy had, as I understand it, was furious when he found that those missiles were still there.

STERN: Yes, he asked to have... to withdraw them and now he was caught with the possibility that they might ask for a trade off.

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YOST: To have them withdrawn.... Yes, there was a terrible fear -- one of the most regrettable aspects of the conduct of foreign policy in my opinion is the fear of being seen to be afraid. And this was a typical example. While we had every intention of withdrawing them, regretted they hadn't been withdrawn before, we were afraid to seem soft and weak by withdrawing them in exchange for the ones in Cuba.

STERN: The ones in Cuba.

YOST: Had we done so, if you look back in retrospect, the humiliation of the Russians would have been a good deal less and they might well not have gone in for this as much, to such a degree. This enormous build up of arms that they have done as a consequence, of their terrific humiliation and the feeling that this must never happen again. So, had Stevenson's advice been followed in that case we would probably today be better off than we are. And of course the result would have been the same as far as the missile in Cuba went.

STERN: Yes, they were withdrawn from Turkey shortly thereafter. Quietly.

YOST: Yes. It was a purely... as I say... a psychological weakness, I call it, a fear of appearing weak.

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STERN: Did he, did you have anything to do with the events immediately after the crisis was resolved at the UN with the negotiations going on for inspection of the removal of the missiles?

YOST: Well, I sat in on those conversations that went on for some weeks with Kuznetzov [Vasily Vasilyevich Kuznetsov] and McCloy [John J. McCloy] until January when I went to California to my son's wedding.

STERN: The big snag apparently was the fact that Castro would not permit a UN team to come in and actually oversee the removal of the missiles. Were there any other issues that were...?

YOST: Yes, yes. Well, there was an attempt to draw up an agreed upon statement and that was worked on in great detail over a period of two months at least. And almost agreed but not quite. And it was finally decided that the crisis had sufficiently dissolved or eroded in this period so that it was no longer necessary to issue a statement and one would simply go on what had already been said. That we didn't intend to invade Cuba on our side and the Russians had withdrawn their missiles on their side.

STERN: Apparently the aftermath of the crisis did create, at least for a while, some real concern in Washington that the whole thing could become inflamed all over again. Especially as a result of Castro's intransigence on the UN teams. And I know that Stevenson apparently

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had some -- I guess, perhaps resentment is somewhat of a strong word -- of the fact that McCloy was sent down at all.

YOST: Well, I think perhaps he did feel that he could have handled it. But, he pretended he didn't.

STERN: Apparently, I mean, it certainly suggested to him that they might feel he was too soft which is why they sent a nice, tough, hard-liner like McCloy to back him up.

YOST: But I think that was part of it, but I think the major reason he was sent was that he was a prominent Republican. And Kennedy wanted to be sure he had a bi-partisan backing. Stevenson recognized that. He was a good friend of McCloy so there was never any friction between the two.

STERN: Did Stevenson ever discuss the whole crisis with you in any kind of detail? I mean, his perception of the way the President had handled it? Did he feel that he had been...? Let me give a little sort of a preface to this question. There are now a number of revisionist historians who are coming down fairly hard on JFK, arguing that all of the praise of the way he handled the crisis may be somewhat misplaced. And that, for example, he should

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not have gone on national television and announced the presence of the missiles in what amounted to an ultimatum. He should first have contacted Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev] privately and essentially told him we know what you've done and you've got forty-eight hours or else. Something to that effect so that if Khrushchev had to back down, he could back down privately rather than publicly. In other words, perhaps it forced the situation literally to the brink of nuclear war and that there were options short of that. I wonder if you feel, how you feel about that.

YOST: No, my feeling then, I think Stevenson's feeling and my feeling still is that on the whole, with the possible exception of his Turkish missile business, it was very well handled indeed. I don't think it could have been kept quiet. It was amazing that it was kept as quiet as it was as long as it was. You remember the New York....

STERN: That's right, Reston [James Barrett Reston] found out about it. Sure.

YOST: Yes, so... and of course that would have been an ultimatum too. But of course....

STERN: Without the ultimate... public humiliation.

YOST: Yes, of course I'm sure Kennedy was affected by the fact that he had met so recently with Gromyko [Andrei A. Gromyko] who had....

STERN: ...lied to him.

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YOST: Deceived him on that.... No, I thought, on the whole, except for the failure to use the Turkish missiles as a ploy for solving the Russian wounds, it was very well handled indeed.

STERN: Apparently Stevenson also suggested some kind of a quid pro quo on Guantanamo, feeling that it was not essential to American interests and....

YOST: I don't remember that.

STERN: He did. Apparently he did and during the flare up over the Bartlett-Alsop article he tried to get from the White House the notes that were taken of the meetings so that he could see precisely what he had said. But Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] wouldn't let him have them. He sent Clayton Fritchey to get them but Bundy would not let him have them. He said they were the property of the President. Kennedy stayed out of it which in effect, endorsed Bundy's position.

On the other major issues, particularly the Third World kinds of issues many of Stevenson's staff people feel that that was his area of greatest interest, Africa, etc. Did you feel that was the case?

YOST: Well, I....

STERN: He felt that the administration was too Europeanist, Achesonian, so to speak.

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YOST: Well, I think there's no question that he wasn't in sympathy with Acheson's [Dean G. Acheson] hard line in general and he thought that it was too rigid, went too far, was too alarmist. And he was very deeply interested in our relations with the Third World. But part of his preoccupation with the Third World in that job

arose from the fact that it is the Third World that the UN is principally concerned with. The UN doesn't get much bi-lateral US-Soviet relations. The Cuban Missile Crisis was an exception. Normally, that only appears tangentially. Nor does it get into NATO matters. So it doesn't... An ambassador to the UN doesn't have much reason to become involved in European or major US-Soviet negotiations. It's the rest of the world that is dealt with at the UN and this was so even in those days though there were less Third World members than there are now. The big issues that were up there from time to time, both during Stevenson's day and after were the Congo and the Middle East and, for a while, South East Asia, Cyprus which is sort of a borderline case between the Third World and Europe, and Indian-Pakistan....

STERN: Did you feel that his position, for example, on issues like Chinese representation was noticeably different than that of the administration?

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YOST: Oh, yes. His... one of his strong recommendations in the first year was that we move to a two-China policy. And, Kennedy for a time as far as we could gather, considered that very sympathetically indicating an intellectual interest at least in moving in that direction but each year it didn't seem politically wise to try it that year and so it was put off until the next one. And eventually until the second term.

STERN: That strikes me as a very interesting point because there are a number of people who argue that the essential difference between Stevenson and Kennedy -- and frankly I think that this is probably oversimplified -- is that Stevenson was quote "an idealist" and Kennedy quote "a pragmatist." But I think there was a certain truth to it and you can see it in that Chinese representation issue where Stevenson had he been president, I think, would have been less concerned with the political effects and more concerned to do what he felt had to be done and that ultimately had to come. While Kennedy would say let's, let's just wait. It isn't quite the right time.

YOST: Of course, Stevenson would have argued that he was more pragmatic....

STERN: Yes, that's....

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YOST: ...on the question of long term and short term....

STERN: On the long term priorities as opposed to the short term priorities, I... sure.

YOST: And there was a similar argument about the recognition of Mongolia, actually establishing diplomatic relations with Mongolia which for a time was

seriously contemplated. And of course we later did make an arrangement with the French Africans, we had to to get, I've forgotten, Mauritania, I guess....

STERN: Right. Right. There was a significant break in policy over Angola in that the United States voted with the Soviet Union and against the NATA countries, breaking the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] line. Did you participate in that? Was Stevenson a major element in...?

YOST: Well, all through the southern African issues the... South Africa, Rhodesia, the Portuguese colonies, Stevenson and the US mission was constantly trying to get a more liberal policy, to go farther than either Kennedy or Johnson was prepared to go for political reasons. So there was a constant hassle on that and Stevenson was able to get a more forthcoming position than would have been the case had he not pushed hard. On the other hand, not as forthcoming as he would liked it to have been.

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STERN: Right. I'd like to get, in a very personal sense in terms of your own view of Kennedy. I was struck in your books, particularly the *Conduct and Misconduct of Foreign Affairs*, the fact that you felt that he had been too -- I think you used the term "gung-ho" -- too concerned about humiliation, too concerned about proving that he was strong and all the rest of that. But you made a very interesting exception which struck me when you said, "With the exception of his last year." And....

YOST: Well, of course....

STERN: I wondered if you simply meant the American University speech....

YOST: Oh, I was much impressed by that as I think most everyone was and then the nuclear test bans which followed and one had the impression that he was moving in that direction. Meetings I was in and the statements he made, one heard....

STERN: Some of his assistants suggest that he intended to run in sixty-four on what amounted to a platform of detente. So that was....

YOST: There certainly were foreshadowing of that and I think it might have been. I've always been terribly curious and nobody will ever know, as to what he'd have done about Vietnam.

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STERN: That is the great unanswered question.

YOST: Yes, we know. Who was it, Ken O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] who said categorically that he would have phased down... and phased out....

STERN: Yes, O'Donnell, O'Donnell claims that he told, that he said he would remove the troops as soon as he -- not the troops, well, the advisors, call them what you will -- as soon as he was reelected. But I think the evidence is extremely ambiguous. I would not be willing to say. I just can't....

YOST: Yes, I'm....

STERN: You can almost take your choice.

YOST: I'm not at all sure but.... that....

STERN: I think a very powerful argument is the fact that the major people who advised Johnson to escalate were Bundy, Rusk, McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and

Rostow [Walt W. Rostow] and they were all Kennedy people. And they would have all been there. So you would have to therefore assume that the President would have rejected the advice of all these people. Which is, I think, not easy to....

YOST: Well, and also his temperament that damned if he was going to be beaten and seen to be pushed around by....

STERN: Right. And yet, on the other hand, he did express even two weeks before his death the speech in which he said that they must fight this war on their own. He certainly had a very significant sense of distrust of the

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military and their advice.

YOST: Yes.

STERN: Especially after the Bay of Pigs but he had it even before that. So it's very hard to say, very, very hard to say. And, I think it really depends on whether one is a partisan of Kennedy or... that's how it goes.

YOST: Well, I'm a partisan of Kennedy but I'm just not sure about that.

STERN: Well, I agree, I agree. I just don't think anyone can or ever will know. Johnson

tried very hard to make the case that what he was doing was simply an

outgrowth and a logical continuation of what JFK had started. And, to a degree, he could make that case. But....

YOST: Well, except there was an enormous escalation in the beginning of sixty-five....

STERN: Yes. Right. There's a substantive difference. That's right, there's a substantive difference there that is just so enormous.

YOST: Yes.

STERN: And represents really a turning of the corner to a wholly different kind of operation.

YOST: One can rationalize what Kennedy did... I think he went somewhat too far but it was obviously far, far less than Johnson.

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STERN: He was intrigued with this whole counterinsurgency idea....

YOST: That always seemed to me at the time ridiculous because how we thought we Americans in our environment could teach South Vietnamese how to fight North Vietnamese in a jungle or all sorts of other remote places totally unknown to us is just extraordinary. [Laughter] But we had some sort of strange techniques that....

STERN: ...techniques that failed miserably.

YOST: Yes. That was one of the sources of the difficulty, of course. And it was carried on under Johnson who just thought we were so technologically advanced and tactically, that we could do it better than anybody else. On their home ground.

STERN: McNamara was the real force behind the whole theory. He believed that if you had all those helicopters and you had all that kind of material, that you could do virtually anything.

YOST: I've just been reading Michel Herr's *Dispatches*. Have you read that?

STERN: No.

YOST: And, it's a sad, sad book. He was a correspondent through a good part of the war and his really very graphic, excellent writing, told accounts of his life

among the troops. But also he has one episode of McNamara, a briefing for McNamara shortly after he'd arrive there, I guess that was in sixty-four. And

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McNamara's intense concern with all the technological features and total ignorance and neglect of all the psychological, political factors.

STERN: Well, it was like making motor cars.

YOST: Yes.

STERN: It wasn't.

YOST: Of course, poor old McNamara realized that later and...

STERN: Yes, that's one of the great tragedies.

YOST: ...and has been trying to make up for it ever since.

STERN: Did.... I know that Stevenson apparently was very concerned about the so-called wars of national liberation. Yet, on the other hand, didn't seem to feel very... that counterinsurgency would be very effective.

YOST: I think he did. And he was, of course, ambivalent on this issue for that reason. He was indignant as I was at the Communist pretense in so many places, that they were fighting for national liberation and had already occurred but they were simply trying to take over. On the other hand, he felt we were getting too deeply involved in Vietnam. Of course, this was particularly later on after Kennedy's death. He became very disturbed in the first six months of sixty-five before he died.

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STERN: Right. That brings me to another point which I think is a very important one. The... apparently for a man in a position like that, especially a man like Stevenson, there must have been just a tremendous strain in being -- I guess the term to use is being a good soldier -- and advocating a position before the world in a forum like the United Nations which he did not really think was the right position.

YOST: Yes.

STERN: And it must have been very painful for him. And, of course, there were those who urged him to resign and not to do it!

YOST: Of course, he was careful I think never to take a position in support of something that he morally disapproved of. He was ambivalent about some of these issues and he thought we were leaning farther in one direction than he would have liked to. But it wasn't a fundamental disagreement which we had led him to.

STERN: Right. My sense of his position on Vietnam is that he basically supported Johnson. But had grave doubts, for example, about the bombing.

YOST: Well, I think.... I mean he supported our trying to... stem a Communist take-over of the south up to a point. But, as you say, when the bombing came about that was the first major intrusion, major over involvement and then he became very concerned

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about both getting in too deeply and where....

[END OF TAPE I. BEGINNING OF TAPE II]

STERN: ...in 1965. Apparently there too he had significant doubts about it. But he did defend the administration at the UN [US intervention in Dominican Republic, 1965.]

YOST: Yes.

STERN: It must have been a great strain on him.

YOST: Yes, he wasn't happy about that and he.... Once again, of course, that's something that happened very fast and there wasn't much opportunity for thrashing it out before we had become deeply involved. And his position probably was then to try to help the best he could to extricate ourselves with, in the most constructive and honorable fashion possible. It was that that he was endeavoring to work on and I guess the ultimate extrication wasn't too bad.

STERN: I think one could argue that it could have been accomplished much earlier with much less loss of life.

YOST: Well, I don't think we needed to go in in the first place.

STERN: Well, sure.

YOST: Aside from perhaps really just removing our citizens.

STERN: One other personal note in terms of your own experience

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at the UN, I wonder if, this question of being a good soldier, so to speak, of having to defend an administration position about which you had some doubts, some very major doubts. From your writing I can't help but wonder if you weren't in a very similar position over Vietnam when you were appointed... in your period as ambassador under the Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] administration. Particularly during the Cambodian invasion and that whole....

YOST: Yes.

STERN: You might have been in a position that may have reminded you of Stevenson's.

YOST: Except by that time the UN was almost wholly disassociated from that business. In the early days when I... particularly during sixty-five and early sixty-six when I was there after Stevenson under Goldberg [Ambassador Arthur Goldberg] there was constant debate about the UN, I mean about Vietnam. We tried to bring it up before the Security Council and there was a terrific clash about the operation. But by the time I came back in sixty-nine the UN had pretty much washed its hands of it. Occasionally somebody in the general debate or somebody on the other side of the debate on some other subject would make a nasty reference to it. But we didn't have to defend up there our position on Vietnam. That was done from Washington as far as it went.

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STERN: Was it a factor in your choice to resign, for example?

YOST: No, no.

STERN: Not really?

YOST: No, I was kicked out as far as that goes. I wasn't... that wasn't an influence. There were just a few words about my personal belongings. I was sent... it was to my intense astonishment that I was chosen by Nixon for this job because while I had never met him, I had constantly opposed his positions and policies and I was both a foreign service officer and a Democrat, neither of which he had liked. And in fact I'd been on one of... the head of one of Humphrey's [Hubert H. Humphrey] task forces. So I think the reason I was chosen was that he decided, because of the narrowness of his victory perhaps, that he wanted a Democrat in that position. He first offered it to Humphrey and it was turned down immediately. He next tried to get Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] and Shriver was... Accepted and then posed a lot of conditions which Nixon and Rogers [William P. Rogers] and Kissinger [Henry A. Kissinger] strongly objected to. And, but they

were rather afraid that Shriver would announce publicly that he'd accepted the job and they'd be stuck with these conditions. SO they hastily scurried around to find another available Democrat.

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And Rogers had known me, worked with me when he was on the General Assembly delegation in sixty-five. I suppose that's how my name came up. So, I was appointed but I think, I'm sure that as time went on, while we never had any confrontations, it must have been clear to Nixon that I wasn't in sympathy with many of the things he was doing and he decided he wanted a Republican, somebody close to him there and so he offered it to George Bush. So it wasn't that I, though in fact I had intended to resign at the end of that Assembly session because I was more and more out of sympathy with what was going on.

STERN: I see. I wonder if we could.... Excuse me.

YOST: I did hope when he came in in sixty-nine that he might have, having finally achieved his lifetime ambition to be president, do what he said was going to do and bring us all together and get us out of Vietnam a lot more rapidly than he did. But I didn't have this agonizing dilemma that you mention of having to defend Vietnam at the UN which I should not have done and that was all. I strongly object to that and I was repeatedly saying so in the administration, urging... I urged when I first came in that they tell Thieu [Nguyen Van Thieu] that we were getting out within a year and a half, phasing out

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within a year and a half or two years. And by the end of that time we'd have all our troops out and he'd have to hack it with what weapons and economic aid he had been given.

STERN: If we could go back....

YOST: But of course this whole business of ambassadors supporting positions that they don't entirely agree with is endemic to the profession. It's unavoidable because decisions are taken on the basis of a whole range of issues, domestic and foreign, which often don't jibe with just what an ambassador thinks would be the wisest position vis-a-vis the country that he's accredited to or the UN community. And he realizes that in many cases, in most cases, decisions have to be taken on other bases than just his own parochial concerns. So as long as his... he doesn't feel that his moral values are being grossly affronted why it's part of his duty to carry on in support of his government. A foreign service officer always feels that he should be at complete liberty to express the strongest objections to a policy as long as it's under consideration. But once the secretary or the president has decided that that has to be the policy then he obeys just as a military officer does if he disapproves of the tactics and strategy.

STERN: I wonder if we could go back to one other point on Vietnam which I think is very intriguing, the initiative,

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the so-called U Thant peace initiative. And, how serious do you think that it was and do you think Stevenson pursued it adequately? Why, why do you think it came to nothing?

YOST: Well, I think probably it would have come to nothing anyway given the positions at the top on both sides. But I think it's a shame that it wasn't pursued more actively even if only for cosmetic reasons, to demonstrate that we were going the last mile to try to find a compromise, a settlement. And I have never known just what happened to it here in Washington. Whether it was Rusk or Johnson who gave it a pocket veto.

STERN: Richard Pedersen [Richard F. Pedersen] has said that he felt and I think he mentions that he felt that... his view was that you also felt that it was potentially a loss of a real chance for peace.

YOST: Well, as I say, I wasn't too optimistic but I felt it should definitely have been pursued and....

STERN: Stevenson seemed lethargic about pursuing it and my own feeling is that it was probably because he was so sure that Rusk would just step on it.

YOST: Maybe, I don't know. Actually, as you may know from the records, I wasn't aware of it. I wasn't consulted about it when it was first presented.

STERN: Yes, I am aware of that. Right.

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YOST: I only became aware of it a couple of months, two or three months later, I guess, when Stevenson was away at some point and Thant asked me, "What's happened to this?"

STERN: And you knew nothing about it.

YOST: And I didn't know anything about it so I quickly checked with Cleveland who also knew nothing about it. And, and we managed to unearth it but still we didn't really get a satisfactory answer and sort of a brush off.... It wasn't, hadn't been considered important at all, just a gimmick, a ploy not worth following up.

STERN: I wonder if we could turn to some of the sort of internal United Nations questions, that is, about the way Stevenson ran the mission, the way the mission operated. I was particularly intrigued by, in John Bartlow Martin's book, the numbers of position papers that were written, a number of which you wrote. Just how were these things assigned? How much of a role did Stevenson himself have in them? Do you feel they were taken seriously either by Stevenson or the State Department or the White House?

YOST: Well, it's very hard to generalize. As I said, he assigned among his deputies the various issues and then it was up to the deputy with his staff under him to work out policies for Stevenson's consideration and for taking them to Washington

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for dealing with these particular issues. And, some of it was oral and some of it was position papers and obviously they all went to Stevenson for consideration and were considered either by him alone or with a group in the mission, argued out and discussed, and sent on to Washington with recommendations, and sent on to Washington with recommendations.... And I think he ran a good shop because.... He was often accused of not being a good administrator but I think he kept on top reasonably well with what was going on in this enormous hurley-burly and vast diversity of subjects that would constantly come before him. The one mistake I think in this area that occurred, which was due to undue compartmentalization, was that the Article 19 issue -- you're familiar with that?

STERN: Yes, of course!

YOST: ...was carried on initially on the economic side of the mission as an economic problem which it was.

STERN: It was. Well, in a way.... In a sense it was.

YOST: Yes, I mean, it fell, it was payments....

STERN: Yes. Sure.

YOST: ... a financial question. And, the decision was taken there, without the political side really being brought in at all, to seek the advisory opinion from the Court. And once we'd gotten that far down the road if it turned out, as it did turn out, the advisory opinion was that these were expenses of

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the organization, then you were headed for this major confrontation which occurred and which, after it had blown up in this way, Stevenson felt as I did that it was just not worth the candle.

STERN: There apparently were some major disagreements within his staff over....

YOST: Oh, there were, there were.

STERN: Francis Plimpton.

YOST: Francis Plimpton felt very strongly as a lawyer that they were bound in honor to do this. Pedersen supported that view and of course the real problem was that Cleveland and Rusk had committed themselves to congressional committees to insist that the Russians and of course the French, pay.

STERN: Right. Do you agree with...?

YOST: And, there was no, there was no way to force a sovereign nation to pay. YOU were starting on a road where you couldn't win.

STERN: Clayton Fritchey said that... accused Plimpton and those who advocated this tough position on Article 19 essentially of a covert operation to force the Soviet Union out of the UN. That's what they really wanted. Plimpton denies this vehemently.

YOST: That's right. I'm sure that wasn't the case, no. Definitely. Clayton's mistaken on that. But I think they were... they became so convinced of the

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legal validity of their case which I wouldn't disagree with at all. And it became, as I say, a point of honor, you just couldn't... But it was unrealistic to expect this to lead anywhere. And, as I was constantly pointing out, if the roles had been reversed and the UN was trying to make us pay for an operation of which we disapproved, which indeed was primarily designed to get us out of a certain area, the congress wouldn't in a hundred years have put up the money for it. So why expect the Russians to be any different.

STERN: Did you...? I wonder if you could describe the way the mission changed with the transition from Stevenson to Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg]? Where there major changes, administratively and in the way the staff operated? I know a number of people have suggested that Goldberg was a very different kind of a man and administrator.

YOST: Well, he was obviously a very different person. I was just trying to think. I

don't recall off hand any dramatic changes in the conduct of the mission. The personalities were very different. Goldberg took hold extremely well. Due to a coincidence, he came in at a time when we were about to assume the presidency of the Security Council, on the one hand,

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and when the India-Pakistan war was just breaking out. So we had a terrific job and he handled it brilliantly. He's an extraordinary negotiator, indefatigable, seeking and ultimately obtaining compromises, on the other hand, no orator at all so he, as contrasted with Stevenson who was a marvelous orator but I knew him as a shy man. They had different qualities. Neither one of them was primarily interested in administration but ran a reasonably good shop.

STERN: Did you feel, do you agree with the assessment in Martin's book that Stevenson was contemplating resignation in sixty-five, that he was very unhappy, frustrated, bored?

YOST: Well, that's true but, of course, Stevenson was always contemplating resignation. [Laughter] He was never entirely satisfied that he was able to do what he wanted to do in world affairs in that position where he was also a terrific social burden with this job, going to masses of cocktail parties, luncheons, dinners and so on.

STERN: Do you think he overdid that with the receptions?

YOST: No, no, he didn't overdo it. He underdid it. We were constantly urging him to do more but -- and he was trying to reduce it. Of course, he continued

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-- you know, I suppose this was natural to do, continue all sorts of other outside responsibilities, domestic, political affairs.

STERN: Things like the Eleanor Roosevelt [Anna Eleanor Roosevelt] Foundation?

YOST: The Eleanor Roosevelt Foundation, the Ford Foundation and this kind of thing. So he was terribly harassed and so very frequently he'd say, "Oh, I've just got to get out of this, all that stuff. Think, do some writing and so on." But none of us really took that very seriously because on the other hand he was enjoying this and there, there didn't seem to be an alternative, any other job that would give him the opportunity, a job that he would be likely to get that would give him these opportunities. We couldn't see him going back to Illinois and sitting down to write a book. But it certainly is true that in the last few months after the escalation in Vietnam and the Dominican affair and

so on that he was becoming far more dissatisfied than before and he might well have been looking for another job in a few months.

STERN: Did you have contact with, or did he ever discuss with you this meeting he had a few weeks before his death with a group of writers and intellectuals who had urged him to resign? Paul Goodman and a number of others? Which apparently according to

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Martin and others had a profound impact on him. It unsettled him a great deal.

YOST: Well,....

STERN: Where he felt that this had been his constituency and they were abandoning him and he wasn't quite sure why.

YOST: Well, I don't know about that. I think he... they probably somewhat reinforced some of the doubts he already had. Some of them were good friends of his and it was upsetting to listen to them. If he had disagreed with them wholly he wouldn't have been so upset but it was because he thought there was at least something in what they were arguing and in what they said.

STERN: Then you think that the Eric Sevareid interview which was the night before his death was an accurate expression of his feeling at the time? Sevareid reported that he was very bitter and just couldn't see any way to alter Johnson's course and... he would have to get out.

YOST: Well, I wasn't....

STERN: Did he ever say anything like that to you, for example?

YOST: I was surprised at the bitterness of that interview. I read it. I hadn't seen him for about two weeks. I guess the last time I'd seen him was at the... was at the twentieth anniversary celebration of the UN in San Francisco. We both went out to that.

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And, it was another disappointment because he thought and we all thought that Johnson was lined up to make a statement which would alter our position on the Article 19 thing and he didn't. But nevertheless while he was tired and unhappy he wasn't as strongly bitter as he appeared to be in the Sevareid interview. One wondered if Sevareid hadn't somewhat

exaggerated that and had taken somewhat more seriously some of the griping that was rather characteristic of him, of Stevenson.

STERN: Apparently there are a number of people who suggest that he tended to grip out loud and sometimes injudiciously.

YOST: Yes.

STERN: And then things would, for example, get back to the White House. He would make little cracks about the President or whatever or about the Attorney General and.... I almost have the feeling that he almost wanted them to know he felt this. It's just a sense I have.

YOST: Well, it may be.

STERN: Martin and others -- and I don't want to carry this too far, it's just a sort of an implication -- that he was almost, almost literally killing himself in the last year or so of his life. That his schedule was simply impossible for a man of his age, that his health was not that good, that he had high

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blood pressure, and a number of other problems, that his doctor had warned him about his diet and his weight and about his blood pressure. And that he just refused to do anything.

YOST: Well, I think that's true. He didn't take those -- I don't know, I don't think -- he realized that he was killing himself. I don't think he took the doctor's warnings that seriously. In fact the doctor, I don't believe, had been that serious. The doctor had not said "Your life is in danger." I think he'd said, "You're overweight, you must take... you mustn't eat so much, you must take it a lot easier." But this is the sort of things that doctors say to most everybody in political life. And it is true that we all felt that he was doing... you know, when I said earlier that we urged him to get more into the social, make more appearances, that was in the earlier days. Toward the end we were urging him to do less. Always urged him to cut down on his other activities. But I don't think any of his friends or associates realized that his life was in danger. It was a great surprise.

STERN: Another point, how did you perceive the difference in his relationship with President Johnson as opposed to his relationship with President Kennedy? Apparently in the very early months of the Johnson

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administration he had very high hopes.

YOST: That's right. In the first -- I don't know -- maybe the first year. He felt that his relationship was quite a bit closer to Johnson than it had been to Kennedy. Johnson was frequently calling him in and agonizing with him and saying, "I have this awful problem with that one and I'm getting pushed this way and I'm getting pushed that way and what do you think I ought to do?" Something that Kennedy never did with him. So, he was much encouraged by that. And, as I say, I think that lasted for pretty much the first year but then that, of course, tapered off very rapidly after that.

STERN: Apparently Johnson even dangled the Secretary of State idea before him on at least one or two occasions. At least put that into... gave him the sense that he might get rid of Rusk and that he, that Stevenson was the logical...

YOST: I don't remember his mentioning that.

STERN: And apparently Martin has uncovered evidence that Stevenson was willing to run for vice president in 1964. Indeed he even pursued the vice presidency in sixty-four, which to me was quite a surprise. But it at the very least suggested that he thought he had a good relationship with Johnson.

YOST: Oh, he certainly did that and I do remember the

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subject of the vice presidency coming up and his not rejecting it out of hand. I don't remember his actively pursuing it.

STERN: Did he ever say anything to you specific, very specific about his feelings about Johnson or as he became more disillusioned about Johnson?

YOST: Well, as I say, he repeatedly said he was delighted with the way that Johnson was consulting him. Calling him in. I remember, oh, a dozen times in which he would describe to me a conversation with Johnson of this kind.

STERN: Almost as if his own generation had come back to power and that sort of thing.

YOST: But then, as I say, at some point that dried up and he was very aware that it had dried up and I forget the exact moment that occurred but I would suspect it was after the election.

STERN: Yes. Do you recall that he had any concern or perhaps I should use the word suspicion about the Gulf of Tonkin? Did he accept the administration's description?

YOST: I think....

STERN: There were doubts, some doubts in the Senate. Not very many.

YOST: We were, as I recall, at the mission we were dubious about this. I recall very well that I was. And, I believe he was too. But the thing was so murky we

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had no... we could only rely on the evidence that was presented to us which didn't seem very convincing to us but on the other hand one couldn't say that it was false.

STERN: Do you endorse in any way the position that, for example Richard Gardner takes the position that, that although Stevenson had a very strong sense of values, moral purpose and of ideals, that when it came down to the nitty-gritty, so to speak, that he was often very shallow and unprepared. That he didn't do very much work and he relied on his staff. And that if you, for example, got him on some issue in the Third World he could easily be exposed as being very superficial. And Gardner says that, I ought to add, with a good deal of affection for Stevenson, it's not a nasty or hostile attack on Stevenson.

YOST: Well, I think this is probably a reflection of Dick's deep concern with some of these problems and the feeling that some more of the economic problems which was his....

STERN: ... his area, right.

YOST: ... area. A feeling that Stevenson should have spent more time on them. But with the demands on Stevenson's time, he wouldn't have considered those as important as other things that he was devoting more time to. So, from Dick's point of view, he would have seemed to have neglected problem X, Y or

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Z that Dick thought should be at the very top of the list whereas Stevenson may have put it down here. I guess that's probably the origin of that remark. He certainly devoted untold hours to issues like the Congo or some of these southern African political issues.

STERN: I was struck in the dedication to your book in 1972 which I will quote and which you dedicated to Ambassadors Stevenson and Goldberg as, "statesmen who knew how to make peace although they were not often heeded." That seemed to me to suggest a very strong sense on your part that perhaps had Stevenson, for example, been Secretary of State or maybe indeed president in the early sixties, things might indeed have been very different.

YOST: Well, I think had his advice been, he had been Secretary of State and had the advice that I'm sure he would have given them been heeded, things would have been different and better. Now, whether, given the incompatibility of personality between him and Kennedy it would have worked out, whether they would have been able to work as a team, whether his advice would have been heeded, that I'm somewhat doubtful about, as you know. But I'm certainly convinced that in some important cases his advice would have spared us difficulties. Of course, the outstanding

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examples are the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam.

STERN: Well, I just have a few more points, relatively, not nearly as significant as some of the others. For example, would you want to get into the notion of the typical day at the UN? I mean, what -- if you can just sort of reconstruct briefly what it was like from the moment you arrived to the moment you left. If there was such a thing as a typical day.

YOST: No, I don't really think that's worth going through. I've gone through it several times before and I... it depends so much on what the issue is. We did spend, of course, an enormous amount of time with the Secretary General which was Hammarskjold [Dag Hjalmar Agne Carl Hammarskjold] and U Thant. And also with Cordier [Andrew W. Cordier] and Ralph BUnche [Ralph J. Bunche.] And I think Stevenson handled those relationship extremely well. And they were extremely important to him. Hammarskjold was, of course, a major figure there and it's a great pity he didn't live. And it's a great pity we haven't had more secretaries general like him. U Thant, at least in his earlier, his first term was also good, though not as good, but he relied very heavily on Ralph Bunche. Ralph Bunche really ran the Congo program and did it

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extremely effectively. This was another case in fact where, if Stevenson's advice had been followed, we'd have saved ourselves quite a bit of pain because Bunche felt way back when the Katanga issue first arose, in the relatively early stages, that the Katanga gendarmerie and the mercenaries could have been, could be suppressed with relative ease by an exercise of force by the UN. And for two years the Europeans resisted this bitterly. And their resistance prevailed for some time in the State Department and the White House. Finally the situation got so bad that, of course.... I can remember the meeting in the White House at which the State Department continued to object on behalf of the Europeans but Stevenson was able to convince Kennedy that, to give the green light and to give a certain amount of quick, emergency military assistance and within just a few weeks thereafter the Katanga situation was brought under control.

STERN: Yes.

YOST: And had that been done a year or two earlier, a great deal of money would have been saved among other things and maybe the Article 19 crisis could have been avoided. So this was a case in which Stevenson

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was willing to be a good deal tougher than the administration was because the administration was listening to the British and French and the Belgians.

STERN: Right. Did you have anything to do with planning President Kennedy's visits to the UN, or any of the speech writing or any of that kind of thing? Apparently it was a fairly elaborate process planning a presidential visit.

YOST: Oh, yes, yes.

STERN: I wonder if you might describe that.

YOST: Well, I don't... think the logistics of the planning of the actual visit are especially interesting. What we did was, of course... a presidential statement at the opening of a General Assembly represents the policy which the United States will follow at the UN and sometimes outside the UN over months or a year ahead. So it's a very important policy document, as you know. Much policy is made by speeches. So when... we would usually draft a speech but then there would be prolonged pulling and negotiating with the White House....

STERN: I found in the files of Godfrey McHugh [Godfrey T. McHugh] who had something to do with planning the logistics of presidential travel, of course -- I don't know why these were there but -- an enormous

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pile of letters concerning the President's September 1961 speech to the General Assembly and virtually everyone you can imagine had gotten their opinion in. "You must say this and you must say that." Obviously....

YOST: Yes, yes. it was a terrific thing trying to boil down what was....

STERN: Yes. Just an enormous pile of letters. From not only virtually everybody in Washington but ambassadors here and there and everyone, virtually everyone.

YOST: Well, this is an important statement and was considered more so then than

now, unfortunately. As you know, I feel that our attention to the UN and use of the UN has sadly decline and really since, since the death of Kennedy because he did take the position that the UN was a very important, as Eisenhower and Truman had, a very important element in our foreign policy and much of it should be centered there. Johnson didn't disagree with that in principle but he drifted away because of Vietnam.

STERN: The hostility of U Thant, the obvious hostility. Sure.

YOST: Well, I think....

STERN: Well, unless you have any further points....

YOST: No.

STERN: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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