

**Thomas K. Finletter Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 05/07/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Thomas K. Finletter

**Interviewer:** Philip J. Farley

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**Biographical Note**

Ambassador Thomas K. Finletter was the Secretary of the Air Force from 1950 to 1953 and the United States Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from 1961 to 1965. In this interview Finletter discusses his appointment as the NATO Representative; John F. Kennedy's character and his skills as a politician; and the proposal of and subsequent negotiations over the Multilateral Force Project.

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Thomas K. Finletter

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	First meeting with Congressman John F. Kennedy (JFK)
2	Initial impressions of JFK's skills and character
3	Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, CA
4	Becoming the United States Representative to NATO
5	JFK in the White House: doting father and no-nonsense leader
6	Proposing the Multilateral Force Project
7	Negotiating the Multilateral Force Project
10	Atlantic partnership
11	JFK visits NATO in 1961
12	Members of NATO react to news of JFK's assassination

Oral History Interview

with

Ambassador Thomas K. Finletter

May 7, 1965  
NATO Headquarters, Paris, France

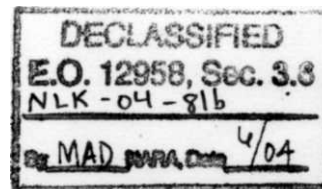
By Philip J. Farley

For the John F. Kennedy Library

FARLEY: Mr. Ambassador, when did you first meet Mr. Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]? Did you have much contact with him during the period, for example, when you were Secretary of the Air Force and he was a member of Congress?

FINLETTER: I don't remember meeting President Kennedy during that time. He was not, I think, on the committees with which I was dealing in the House of Representatives. I saw a great deal of him later, but it's impossible for me to fix the particular date when I first met him. All I can tell for me to fix the particular date when I first met him. All I can tell you is that from the governmental point of view, I did not have any relations with the then Congressman Kennedy, either in connection with the Air Policy Commission or as Secretary of the Air Force.

FARLEY: So that your closer relationship with President Kennedy really came after his election and when he chose you as Ambassador to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]. Did Mr. Kennedy have clear ideas as to what he hoped to see emerge from NATO and from your Ambassadorship which he expressed to you when he asked you to take this responsibility?



FINLETTER: Before I answer that question, may I furnish my answer to the first part of your question as to whether I saw him in between the time when he was a Representative in the House and when he was elected President of the United States. The answer is during that phase, I did see him. As Senator, I remember, on several occasions, seeing him in the Senate office building. I remember one occasion, for example, when for some reason or other there was something I had to deal with him about when he came out of a committee meeting and I remember this incident quite vividly, and of course, I saw him around Washington. The point I am

[-1-]

making is that my relations with Senator Kennedy were not close. They did get closer during the period of the election campaign in 1960 but this was outside of government, because I was not then in government. For example, I remember two occasions quite vividly. One was I met him once in the hotel where he was staying in New York City in order to try to straighten out some difficulty that had arisen between him as the potential candidate (because he had not yet been nominated). The potential candidate and a local democratic club of which I was a member, known as the Lexington Democratic Club, and had had a fuss. I've forgotten what it was all about between the then Senator Kennedy and the President of this club. We met and I think I had some effect in ironing that one out. I remember that because he was (if you like to have something on the personal side), I thought, extremely good with this president of this club. The president of this club was, I thought, being quite unreasonable and here was a man who was trying to be a candidate for the Presidency. And he didn't pull any punches in what he told the young man as to what he thought about his views. In other words, for all his good manners, his courtesy and his charm, on that occasion, and I noticed it very frequently on later occasions, he had an ability to debunk anybody who was saying things that weren't very sensible. There was no easy sort of good fellowship with him. His manners and his charm were all strictly natural and they could turn around to being amiably tough or if necessary, not so amiably tough. I admired it quite a good deal. On another occasion, I re-

[-2-]

member, we met on an intimate basis, during this phase, when my wife and I went up to Boston. We were staying with the Arthur Schlesingers [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.], who was a great supporter, of course, of the candidate Kennedy and later President Kennedy and served in the White House during the Kennedy administration. And there were about four or five others, maybe six, at a dinner in some restaurant in Boston. We spent the whole evening together there. I remember he was again, at this time, a candidate for the nomination for the Presidency. And again, he was a most extraordinarily charming, intelligent man to deal with. I had, and my wife too, had the strongest feelings about what a charming, courteous gentleman of great style that he was. We didn't talk any business at this time or much of anything. It was just ordinary conversation of the kind that Arthur Schlesinger produces which is apt to be pretty good and it was just good fun. That's all there was to that. I'm putting this on the personal side. I then, of course, saw him after he was nominated and I,

perhaps I might say, that during all this time, I had been working for the nomination of Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] for the Democratic nomination and Senator Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman] and one other person and I were the only three delegates on the New York delegation to the Los Angeles convention who were supporting Stevenson and all the rest were solid for Kennedy. I simply mention that to show the fact that once he got the nomination, we were all Democrats together and there was no bad feeling about it, but the fact remains that every time there was a vote at the Los Angeles convention, Herbert Lehman and this other

[ -3- ]

fellow and I would stand up alone amid the something like 190 or whatever there were delegates from New York. All of that on the personal side. Now do you want me to get on to the end of your question which was....

FARLEY: I think it would be interesting to move to the question of what was in the President's mind when he asked you to take this....

FINLETTER: I'd make a guess about that. I think that he was busy with much more important things. I think if he named me, he named me for reasons he thought good. I don't think this appointment kept him awake at night.

FARLEY: Did you talk to him at the time he asked you to take this job as to what he hoped to see emerge from NATO?

FINLETTER: Well now, I think I must tell you he didn't ask me to take this job. He just named me for the job. And the only thing I heard about it was from Dean Rusk. I think I now want to add something else, though, because that gives the wrong impression. I've never had to deal with a high official of government who was more satisfactory to deal with on the professional basis as well as the personal basis but, of course, the two become completely intermingled. As far as Presidents go, the only other President that I had very close dealings with was Mr. Truman [Harry S. Truman]. I did serve under Mr. Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] but on a much lower level but I did serve as Secretary of the Air Force under Mr. Truman and so I did see him very intimately. Mr. Truman was certainly one of the most satisfactory human beings as President to deal with, one can imagine. But so, too,

[ -4- ]

was President Kennedy. It was his combination of really concentrating on the business that the junior official, in one case me as Secretary of the Air Force and the other case, me as Ambassador to NATO. The concentration on the job that I was supposed to be doing and the leadership and interest and direction that he gave me was extraordinary, as was, indeed the case with Mr. Truman. I repeat that President Kennedy's was just as intimate, just as close. I never went to Washington when it wasn't.... it was almost mandatory to go to see him. Even



if you were going through, you almost felt that you had to make an excuse for not calling up and asking for an appointment because he might take it amiss and whenever I saw him in all these meetings in the White House, he was relaxed, he had seemingly time galore, he was extremely casual, but his mind was always relaxed. On what I was supposed to be doing, what he wanted me to do, he wanted to know what I was doing and he'd ask all sorts of penetrating questions. If I may digress a minute as to the manner of all this: the manner of it was really quite extraordinary and that is...first of all, is the big point that you were supposed to be there. An Ambassador who was passing through was supposed to go in and get instructions from the boss. And he got them. And he got the most sympathetic hearing, but again like the story of the president of the Lexington Club, if you got off with some nonsense, you didn't fare very well. But nevertheless, always pleasant, courteous and polite with lots of time. The atmosphere was extraordinary. You'd go in there and you'd be shown into the President's office and sometimes he wouldn't be there

[-5-]

but Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] or somebody else from the family would be very apt to be wandering around the place, or usually accompanied by as many as four or five of her friends and they would be there during the interview very frequently as everybody knows from the pictures that have been taken of the President's room with the children wandering around. Then if the weather was good, there was a place down a little bit away from the White House where the children used to play and he used to occasionally wander out there and take a look to see how things were going down there and you'd go with him and observe that and then come back and talk about NATO. This was the atmosphere of the thing. I'm not... It was relaxed but an extraordinarily concentrated businesslike performance, but under very agreeable and pleasant circumstances. But to give you an example of the sort of thing that he would ask...two things which I shall simply pick out of the innumerable examples of them. One was his whole attitude on the so-called Multilateral Force project. Shortly after he took office, in the early part of his administration in May of 1961, he made a speech to the Canadian legislature of Ottawa in which he proposed a so-called Multilateral seaborne nuclear force to be built in the Alliance. He obviously felt very strongly about this but at the same time, he had the feeling that this is something that was a very daring ideal. He knew historically this was something which was a precedent-making enterprise and one which would be very difficult to achieve and he therefore took it easy. He wasn't moving too fast at the beginning and he began what was a phase which might be described as "what are the

[-6-]

Allies going to do." If they want this, then the United States will look at it. It wasn't a case of the United States pounding the table and saying we must have it; it wasn't even a case of the United States exercising leadership in a quiet, restrained way. It really was an exploratory idea so far as President Kennedy was concerned at the beginning. He very plainly wanted, by his questions, to keep finding out what the Europeans were doing. I remember I had had in July of 1961 some conversations with Chancellor Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer] and others in the German Government on this subject which had been reported from Bonn by our

Ambassador there, Walter Dowling [Walter C. Dowling], and this was one of the things he was interested in. Then I kept him informed of the growing interest in the Multilateral Force, not only on the part of the Germans but also on the part of the Belgians, and indeed later of the French. Unfortunately, the French interest is something which came in rather late in the game and at the wrong time psychologically with respect to the Washington scene. What happened was the French Permanent Representative to NATO at that time made a suggestion to me for the participation by France in this Multilateral Force, which would have been on the basis of France committing about half of her nuclear force and in consideration of our making available certain information to the French which would have assisted them in their nuclear program. I transmitted this to Washington but unfortunately, this came just at a time when the United States had made the decision that they were not going to give any aid to other national nuclear forces and

[ -7- ]

so the French proposal was never even answered. I get the impression this must have troubled President Kennedy a bit because when he kept after me with the theme, "Well, what else can you think of this Multilateral Force? Isn't there something else?" And he was insistent about this and so rightly interested in the question that for quite a long time the Mission here in Paris worked on this question and it ended up in a letter to the President giving our recommendations as to what might be possible in the form of a substitute. Our studies came to the conclusion that there was really nothing that could be a substitute, properly speaking for this project for the Multilateral Force. It dealt, after all, with the most powerful weapons in the arsenals in the West. It was an audacious plan because it was novel in the sense that it provided for a joint and several ownership by the member nations in a surface fleet of vessels which would have these missiles on them with nuclear warheads. It was a powerful force but more than that by the reason of the fact that it dealt with the most powerful weapon in existence and dealt with it on an Alliance basis, it was something which had enormous political potential. And this the President recognized. But at the same time as I say, and it's very typical of him, he recognized the political difficulties of getting the results of political advantages. And therefore he wanted to know what could be done and for a long time he did what could be done in lieu of this more difficult enterprise. And I believe but this I do not know, except from inferences from conversations which I had with him and from what I have heard, for example, Mr. Saragat [Giuseppe Saragat], who at the time was

[ -8- ]

the Foreign Minister of Italy and from Mr. Harold Wilson, who at the time was in opposition in England, which confirms what was my impression; namely, that about the beginning of the fall in 1963, President Kennedy was moving towards the conclusion that it wasn't enough just to leave this leadership on the Multilateral Force up to the Europeans and that the United States would have to move in in a more affirmative way and to exercise what I think might be called a leadership of partnership to develop the project. In any case, this is my impression. I can't document it. I can't prove it, but the evidence is strong to this effect. For example, it was in October 1963 that in fact (and this, of course, was done with the approval

of President Kennedy) a working group was set up in Paris of seven and later eight members of NATO for the purpose of working out the details of a Multilateral Force. This is, as I say, one of the things where I worked quite closely and intimately with the President. He always asked me about this Multilateral Force every time I saw him. I remember—this leads me to an incident that I will mention without attempting to say that I quite understand it. I remember once out of the blue, he asked me, “Do you think my policy towards the French Force de Frappe, the French Nuclear Force, has been correct? And I have the impression that this may have been that he was reflecting on some of the problems that were besetting us at this time because it always seemed to me as an abstract matter that it should be worthwhile not being too rigid about not supporting a national nuclear force, if thereby you could have achieved bringing France into the arrangements for the Multi-

[ -9- ]

lateral Force. I may say, if I may add one word, that from the moment that that offer of the French was rejected, the relations with France on the whole, on the Alliance, and particularly on the Multilateral Force did go down-hill.

FARLEY: I wonder, Mr. Ambassador, if the President ever expressed to you any concern about the difference in the manner of our treatment of France in nuclear matters from that which we dealt with our other great ally, the United Kingdom.

FINLETTER: I think this was what he was thinking about when he asked this question because I do remember that this point of the special treatment that we gave to the United Kingdom and the opposite of this which we gave to France did come up in the conversations. He never expressed an opinion on it except in this possibly indirect way that I've just described.

FARLEY: You have spoken of the Multilateral Force as one of the principal projects which have been pursued to advance Atlantic partnership. This phrase, Atlantic partnership, is one that is particularly associated with Mr. Kennedy who, of course, made a memorable speech on July 4, 1962 on the theme of Atlantic partnership. Did he ever talk with you of other elements which he envisaged as emerging in Atlantic partnership?

FINLETTER: Well, in the first place, let me say that he also, I think it was in the same speech which you have referred (this was in Independence Hall, wasn't it?). I think it was in this same speech that he referred to the interdependence of the indivisibility of the defense of the West. Am I wrong about that? He certainly used that phrase and it was certainly a part of

[ -10- ]

his thinking whether it was in the July 4<sup>th</sup> speech or not. And so that the idea of partnership, the interdependence of the Europe and North America, and the indivisibility of the defense of the West all make up the package of his thinking. There wasn't much discussion about it. He would discuss how it could be. He got down to what you can do to make this thing work. This was what he was doing when he was talking about the Multilateral Force but he also talked about all sorts of other forms of binding the Alliance together. For example, the whole question of political consultation he would ask me about. He would want to know whether or not I was getting the proper information, to be able to brief my fellow members of the North Atlantic Council. He would, I can't remember all the details, of course, but whenever I was having some problem where I thought we were not giving the Council as much information as we could, I would tell him that and he would be very interested in this and would say well if you need any help, let me know. But I didn't need any help because, as a matter of fact, on this particular point the United States Government has been quite good. I think that our efforts to consult with our Allies are by no means perfect, have been in the right direction. There's never been any question and there certainly was none in President Kennedy's mind about the importance of consultation as a form of welding the Alliance together.

FARLEY: Mr. Ambassador, did the President come to NATO during the course of his visit to Europe in 1961?

FINLETTER: Yes, he came to NATO on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, 1961. I remember it very well.

[-11-]

I stopped for him at the Elyseé where he was meeting with President De Gaulle [Charles De Gaulle] and I rode up with him in a special car which had been made available to him by President De Gaulle. It had a bubble top which he could pull back and did, and it was really just like a campaign—a New York campaign going up with a cheering crowd. The only thing I can add is, as I am sure is testified by many others, and that is the enthusiasm of the crowds was enormous. His speech to the NATO Council was, as I remember it, from a text which he disregarded. I think that he spoke off the cuff, and made a very interesting speech for about, as I remember it, 15 minutes or even longer than that. I think there was some give and take—I may be wrong about that. But in any case, it was a very pleasant occasion and I know that Dirk Stikker [Dirk U. Stikker], who was the Secretary General at the time, was enormously impressed by it and spoke of it on several occasions. The President made an extraordinarily pleasant and attractive and interesting appearance. I don't think there's any point in my referring to the other events of this trip. They've been covered by others who were in on all the various receptions and meetings and so forth, so I don't think there's any point in my adding anything concerning this trip other than this one NATO item.

FARLEY: What was the reaction here in NATO at the time of the President's assassination?

FINLETTER: I think in a word, I think it can be said that all those other representatives of the 14 countries whom I knew here—especially the Ambassadors whom I knew better than the others, I think there was a sense of

[-12-]

sincere personal loss with them. This is the outstanding point I would make. This was not just the normal emotions that you would understand of such a horrible murder but there was a special feeling, almost as though there was something personal with the people who had seen him at the Council. It must be remembered it wasn't too long after the meeting at the Council that I've just described. It was only 2 years and a half and they remembered him very well. There was a definite personal feeling, is my point, and personal grief.

FARLEY: I recall going to your house, Mr. Ambassador, very shortly after the terrible news reached us and that I had hardly reached there when a personal call came to you from the French Permanent Representative, Mr. Seydoux [Roger Seydoux].

FINLETTER: Yes, I remember that. They were all calling and they were all, as I say, deeply moved as if some very close member of their family had been lost.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-13-]

Thomas K. Finletter Oral History Transcript  
Name List

**A**

Adenauer, Konrad, 7

**D**

De Gaulle, Charles, 12  
Dowling, Walter C., 7

**K**

Kennedy, Caroline Bouvier, 6  
Kennedy, John F., 1-13

**L**

Lehman, Herbert H., 3

**R**

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 4  
Rusk, Dean, 4

**S**

Saragat, Giuseppe, 8  
Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., 3  
Seydoux, Roger, 13  
Stevenson, Adlai E., 3  
Stikker, Dirk U., 12

**T**

Truman, Harry S., 4, 5

**W**

Wilson, Harold, 9