

**U Thant Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 06/23/64**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Secretary General of the United Nations (1961 - 1971). In this interview, Thant discusses how the United Nations worked with John F. Kennedy's administration, international relations, and his relationship with JFK, among other issues.

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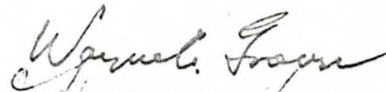

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U Thant – JFK#1

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Oral History Interview

with

U THANT

June 23, 1964

By Henry Brandon

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BRANDON: Mr. Secretary-General, when did you first meet President Kennedy?

THANT: Well, Mr. Brandon, I first met President Kennedy when he came to address the General Assembly on 25 September 1961, when I was Permanent Representative of Burma. After his address he held a reception for all Permanent Representatives, and on that occasion I had a few minutes with him alone.

BRANDON: What was the setting of that meeting?

THANT: Well, about a hundred Permanent Representatives to the United Nations were present. President Kennedy stood in line with the President of the General Assembly, and we Permanent Representatives were presented to him one by one and greeted him individually, and he had a few minutes for each of us. That was my first meeting with President Kennedy.

BRANDON: So, when you said you had a talk with him alone, this was in line, standing in line with others?

THANT: Yes, in line.

BRANDON: Yes. Do you remember what you were talking about then?

THANT: I do not remember exactly what we talked about, but we discussed some salient points of his address on that occasion.

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BRANDON: This was after the address?

THANT: Yes, after the address.

BRANDON: Yes. Do you remember what particular points?

THANT: No, but I thanked him for his support of the United Nations, its ideals and its activities.

BRANDON: Now, what did he have to say then ?

THANT: He did not say much on specific issues. But all of us were genuinely thankful to him for his public expression of support for the UN, coming as it did at a time when there was a general atmosphere of gloom on account of the tragic death of Dag Hammarskjold.

BRANDON: Yes. So this was the total of your first meeting with Kennedy?

THANT: Yes, that is true.

BRANDON: Yes, and then the second meeting?

THANT: The second meeting was in January 1962, when I was Acting Secretary General of the United Nations. On that occasion Ambassador Stevenson asked me to lunch with him and he told me President Kennedy would also be present. So I had lunch with President Kennedy and Ambassador Stevenson in Mr. Stevenson's suite at the Waldorf Towers. If I remember correctly it was 19 January 1962. And there, of course, I had an opportunity to exchange views with him on several subjects, the financial situation of the United Nations, some of the African affairs including the Congo, and East-West relations.

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BRANDON: Tell me, what was your general impression of Kennedy's attitude towards the United Nations?

THANT: My impression was that President Kennedy was sincerely desirous of

seeing the United Nations develop into a really effective instrument for the maintenance of peace and for the performance of the functions outlined in the Charter. He was one of those leaders who see in this world organization the only potential for the effective discharge of the Charter obligations.

BRANDON: Now, you said that you were discussing at this point the Congo operation?

THANT: Yes.

BRANDON: Did you feel that some people sometimes accused the United States of using the United Nations to advance American interests, or did you feel that there was a really altruistic attitude that dominated American policy?

THANT: It is difficult to attribute purely altruistic motives when one assesses the foreign policy of great powers. But as far as President Kennedy was concerned, I believe that he had no axe to grind as far as the Congo was concerned. His support of the United Nations action in the Congo was motivated, among others, by considerations of peace in the area, peace in Africa and the prevention of direct confrontation of Big Powers. President Kennedy felt very strongly, in my view, that only a peaceful atmosphere is conducive to the growth of democratic institutions. This is my answer to your question regarding altruistic motives.

BRANDON: Now, many Americans, including President Kennedy perhaps, had at various times doubts as to what extent the Central Government should be supported, to what extent Tshombe was in the right. Do you

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remember these conflicting reports and how he discussed them with you if he did?

THANT: Personally, I got the impression that he was not very impressed by Mr. Tshombe, in spite of the fact that some of the American leaders here had different views, and I think he felt that Mr. Tshombe was acting out of tune with the general African trend of thinking. He was out of tune with the African sentiment, and that was the impression I got.

BRANDON: Do you think the success of the United Nations operation essentially depended on the backing of the United States in the Congo?

THANT: I would say yes. That is definitely true. Without United States support, I do not think the United Nations would have been able to achieve the results it has achieved.

BRANDON: So really in a way American policy then helped to strengthen the United

Nations?

THANT: Yes, certainly.

BRANDON: Do you remember more about discussions on that occasion relating to the Congo?

THANT: We did not deal with the specific questions involved, you know. We just dealt with the general situation in the Congo and the impact of the United Nations involvement there. He was emphatically of the view that the U.N. at that time was doing a magnificent job. Of course, we did not get into details...

BRANDON: And the financial side of it?

THANT: Yes, he was very much concerned about the immense financial drain on this organization because of the Congo

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operations. He was understandably worried about the future of the U.N. because of this financial problem.

BRANDON: What attitude did you take in discussing this with him? I know you shared, of course, the worries.

THANT: Yes, I did I did share the worries, but in such matters, Mr. Brandon, as you know, I have to leave it to the decision of the principal organs of the U.N., like the General Assembly and the Security Council. I do not think I have the authority to come out publicly with any formula.

BRANDON: Now, you said that you discussed the whole situation in Africa.

THANT: Some of the problems of Africa, particularly the racial problems — apartheid, policies of the South African government, and so on. But of course we didn't deal with the specifics.

BRANDON: What was the president's position on apartheid?

THANT: I think he shared the views of the vast majority of the member states in the U.N. that the apartheid policy is a wrong policy and concerted efforts should be made to impress this view upon the South African government.

BRANDON: What do you mean by “efforts”?

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THANT: At first, moral pressures, and then practical measures. We have of course the General Assembly resolutions and the Security Council resolutions to that effect. And generally speaking, the U.S. government found itself on the side of the majority of the member states on this question of apartheid.

BRANDON: Did you talk about East or West Africa or Nigeria, in particular?

THANT: No, I don't think that we covered such specific subjects.

BRANDON: Or did you talk about the question of the problems arising out of these newly independent nations?

THANT: Yes. He expressed his sympathy and appreciation and understanding of the African mood. I think he was one of those American leaders who understood the "winds of change" in Africa, as the British prime minister once said. And particularly, his attitude on Algeria, as you will no doubt remember, was received with much gratitude and appreciation by most Africans, even in the days when he was a senator.

BRANDON: Would you say exactly what you mean by "his attitude on Algeria"?

THANT: He expressed his sympathy with the Algerian liberation movement, when the Algerians were struggling for independence. Of course it was very much appreciated by the Algerians. This was reaffirmed when I visited Algeria last February, by the Algerian leaders.

BRANDON: Did you talk about any other nations in Africa?

THANT: No. I don't remember anything in particular.

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BRANDON: How long did that conversation last?

THANT: I would say about ninety minutes on the occasion of that first luncheon together.

BRANDON: Did you discuss any other problems?

THANT: Yes. We touched on East-West relations, though not very fully. He was very keen to see that East-West relations improved, and he was for greater understanding between the Soviet Union and the United States.



BRANDON: Do you remember any specific phrases in which she expressed that?

THANT: No, I'm afraid not.

BRANDON: Did you discuss the test ban negotiations at that point?

THANT: No, not at the first meeting.

BRANDON: Or disarmament?

THANT: Yes. Disarmament in general. He reiterated the earnest desire of the United States government to achieve even a small measure of disarmament to start with, and he seemed to be very sincere about it, and particularly in the sphere of test ban. But we didn't enter into specifics. We discussed just the general aspects of disarmament.

BRANDON: Did you have any written communication in between your first and your second meeting?

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THANT: I don't remember. Perhaps there may be some, I think maybe one or two letters. I remember to have received at least one personal note from him. You know, at the end of the lunch I offered him a Burmese cigar. The Burmese cigars look very black and very formidable; so when I offered him a Burmese cigar he was rather taken aback and he asked me whether it was very strong. I assured him that it was very mild and its appearance was rather deceptive, and he smoked it and he told me it was very good. So I offered to give him a few Burmese cigars as a memento of our first meeting if he would be agreeable to accept them. And he agreed. Unfortunately, at that time my stock was rather depleted — my stock of Bernie cigars — so that I had to send a cable to one of my brothers in Burma to send a hundred Burmese cigars by air. You know, the Burmese cigars are very cheap in Burma, incredibly cheap — they cost approximately about \$2.00 per hundred. But the air freight cost me, if I remember correctly, at least \$37.00. When the cigars arrived here, my Chef de Cabinet suggested that I should make them more presentable and so he suggested that I should have a little wooden casket — a wooden box, with a silver plaque properly inscribed. So I told him to go ahead. It cost me another \$40. And of course he sent me a very, very nice letter thanking me for the present. When I told him at our second meeting at Washington about the economic consequences of these 100 cigars, he was rocking with laughter and he observed that it was a case for economic experts to analyze.

BRANDON: Would you like to read his letter into the record?

THANT: Yes. With a 5th February 1962 date, President Kennedy sent me the

following letter:

“Dear Mr. Secretary-General,  
Many thanks for your kindness and sending the cigars. The cigars came at a particularly opportune moment, and I have informed my associates that are less deadly than they might appear at first glance. I enjoyed my lunch and with you very much and I benefited from it. I have found your efforts to maintain the peace very gratifying, and I send you my very best wishes.  
Sincerely,  
John F. Kennedy”

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BRANDON: Did you ever talk to him on the telephone during that period...

THANT: No, I don't think so.

BRANDON: Your next meeting was...

THANT: My next meeting was on the 13th September 1962 when he kindly invited me to lunch with him at the White House in Washington. At the luncheon, besides...

BRANDON: Were you told why he wanted you to come to Washington?

THANT: He told me, through Ambassador Stevenson of course, that he wanted to exchange views with me on certain topics. So I went down to Washington on the same morning, and besides President Kennedy and myself there were only two others present: Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Ambassador Stevenson. Of course, at the lunch we exchanged views on several topics, again including the Congo, the financial situation of the U.N. and East-West relations.

BRANDON: What do you think was the real purpose of the meeting — I mean that he suddenly asked you to come to Washington?

THANT: No, actually our second meeting was tentatively arranged during our first meeting. He told me that he wished to invite me to the White House sometime and I could not make the visit earlier. I could make it only in September 1962.

BRANDON: What happened at the lunch?

THANT: Well, I think the second one was more or less on the same lines as the first lunch. We covered more or less the same topics. And, of course, at that

time, understandably, he was

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much more worried about the financial situation of the United Nations than at our first meeting. And he also told me that he was trying his best to get the defaulters — the defaulting member states — to pay up. He didn't mention any particular country but I had the feeling that he was in touch with General de Gaulle and Chairman Khrushchev, too, in regard to this item. And he also reiterated his earnest desire to improve East-West relations. He also told me that he was in touch with Chairman Khrushchev on a personal basis.

BRANDON: He didn't mention anything specifically?

THANT: No, he didn't. I remember at that lunch, he touched on the subject which, according to him, was very close to his heart: that was a closer partnership between the United States and Europe. He seemed to be a little upset at the turn of events at that time.

BRANDON: This was after Britain had been...

THANT: Yes, after Britain had been refused entry into the European Common Market.

BRANDON: Did he say what he thought this meant for the future?

THANT: I don't remember that he predicted anything for the future, but he was not in any happy mood when he mentioned the subject.

BRANDON: Was it disappointment or was it a real aggrieved...

THANT: It seemed to me that it was more a disappointment than an aggrieved feeling.

BRANDON: Did he indicate how this might influence American policy?

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THANT: No, he didn't. He didn't go into this.

BRANDON: I noticed from his calendar that he had no — his next meeting was at 4 o'clock. Did your lunch last until 4?

THANT: No, I think the lunch was over about 3 o'clock. It took approximately 2 hours.

BRANDON: Did Mr. Rusk intervene?

THANT: Yes, from time to time.

BRANDON: What sort of a relationship, was your impression, had the President with Mr. Rusk?

THANT: Well, my impression was that their relationship was cordial.

BRANDON: But the initiative in the discussion was with who?

THANT: With the President.

BRANDON: Did he ask you any questions?

THANT: Yes, of course, he did; but I don't remember any specific questions he posed. From time to time I took the initiative in exchange of views, and, of course, Ambassador Stevenson also took the initiative on certain items.

BRANDON: How did the President feel at that point about the Congo situation?

THANT: Yes, as most of our other friends failed, he saw no immediate solution of a Congo problem and he felt at that time,

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as he did on the previous occasion, that the United Nations presence would be necessary for quite a long time; and, of course, he agreed that it was simply impossible for the U.N. to be involved indefinitely. I explained to President Kennedy that I had suggested to Prime Minister Adoula earlier in the year to think of priorities in his programme. And in the programme I had suggested to Prime Minister Adoula, the training of Congolese troops should occupy top priority. And in this particular context I had suggested to Prime Minister Adoula to enter into negotiations with some African states, which had experience of the Congo, to provide army instructors. Prime Minister Adoula agreed to that approach. But for some reason my advice and my suggestions didn't go through. I remember to have explained this to President Kennedy also at that lunch.

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BRANDON: What was his reaction?

THANT: He agreed with me that the Congolese government should set about doing something in the way of training the ANC, that is, the Congolese National

Army. And I am sure he must have taken some action in this direction through his ambassador in Leopoldville.

BRANDON: Was there a change after that?

THANT: There was no change, unfortunately. Of course I am not entitled to criticize any member state, but I remember that I had very definite views about the importance of the training of the Congolese Army, and it didn't go through in spite of my repeated attempts to persuade the Congolese government. So the result, as you know, is that today the Congolese Army is not sufficiently trained to cope with the situation in the country.

BRANDON: Now there was a conflict between — you said that the President first suggested that the United Nations Force should stay there. At the same time you also said that he recognized that it couldn't stay indefinitely there. How did the debate between you and him reconcile this conflict?

THANT: I think his attitude was — it seemed from the developments in the Congo, that his preference would be for the United Nations to be there more or less indefinitely. But of course he realized that it was impossible, primarily because of the financial aspects. And I explained to him, as I have just stated, about my suggestions to the government of the Congo, of the imperative need of the Congolese Army training, preferably with the assistance of the African States.

BRANDON: Then came the Cuban operation that year?

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THANT: No, not in September.

BRANDON: No, I mean in late October.

THANT: Late October, yes.

BRANDON: And did you have any contact with him during that phase?

THANT: No, I had no personal contact with him, only through Ambassador Stevenson. And I remember I had some personal contact with the Secretary of State, only on one occasion.

BRANDON: Did the relationship between the President and Mr. Stevenson — that was interpreted in various ways in the American press — affect the United Nations?

THANT: You mean the closer relationship between the President and Ambassador Stevenson?

BRANDON: Well, it was questioned sometimes whether it was close or not.

THANT: No, I had no means of knowing.

BRANDON: What I mean: Mr. Stevenson after all had to represent the United States here. So the question as to the support he had from the President was important, and I was wondering whether you felt that this had any effect here at the United Nations?

THANT: No, I have been all along under the impression that the relations between President Kennedy and Ambassador Stevenson were very good. I didn't hear anything to the contrary.

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BRANDON: Now you took a fairly active part in this Cuban crisis. Can you say a little more about it, as to your contacts with Washington through Ambassador Stevenson, how they affected your own work and your own operations?

THANT: My own operations or my own work had to be based primarily on the results of my discussions with Ambassador Stevenson and Mr. John McCloy, who, as you know, was President Kennedy's personal envoy for this particular purpose. We had almost daily meetings here, sometimes two or three meetings a day, when Mr. McCloy and Mr. Stevenson and sometimes Mr. Harlan Cleveland also were present. I had to base my actions and proposals mainly on the result of our discussions here.

BRANDON: How do you see, in retrospect, the President's handling of the Cuban crisis?

THANT: Well, I think his action was characterized by — if I may so — firmness and conciliation.

BRANDON: Did you think that the way he handled the situation was a correct one?

THANT: On this, I don't think I should express any judgment.

BRANDON: Well, is there anything that you could say about the President, first of all, during the initial crisis of the Bay of Pigs operation, and then about the second Cuban crisis — anything that you can say about the two?

THANT: I don't think — it will not be in the public interest for me to say beyond

that.

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BRANDON: Well, this is not for public consumption. Did you ever discuss with him the subject of the neutral States?

THANT: No, I don't remember discussing it.

BRANDON: Did you discuss with him the problem of, say, regular summit meetings at the U.N. or...

THANT: No, he didn't raise the subject.

BRANDON: Do you remember, did he react at all to your report in which you expressed opposition to voting changes in the United Nations?

THANT: No, he didn't react personally to me, no.

BRANDON: Or at all to the possibility of changes in the Charter?

THANT: Well, he never mentioned the subject to me.

BRANDON: Did you discuss with him Laos?

THANT: Southeast Asia, in general. When he came to address the General Assembly in September 1963, after his address I offered him a luncheon at the United Nations and, in the course of the luncheon, he brought up the situation in Southeast Asia in general and he asked me for my views on this, since I came from a country very close to the area, and since he knew that I was a participant in the Bandung Conference and he knew that I was also interested in the Geneva Agreement of 1954. Then I offered him my assessment of the situation at that time.

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BRANDON: Would you say what you said then?

THANT: Yes, I told President Kennedy that the problem was essentially political and not military, and that the military methods failed in 1954 and that I didn't see how they would succeed nine years later, and he asked me to clarify my concept of this political solution, and I took a few minutes to give him some of my thinking on this.

BRANDON: Was it in terms of how the area could be demilitarized or neutralized or...

THANT: As one who is interested in the peace and stability of the whole area and, for that matter, of the whole world, I felt at that time and I still feel that the return to the Geneva Conference would be better than any other course. Of course, I don't think I should say this in my present position, but I still feel that the Geneva Agreement of 1954 should have been given a fair trial.

BRANDON: How did he react to it?

THANT: He listened to me very attentively. I do not remember that he reacted in any way.

BRANDON: What was it that impressed you about — or if it did — about his mind and about his character?

THANT: He had a very alert mind and his reflexes were very quick, and I think he had a full grasp of the situations he was expected to deal with. No doubt he was one of the most intelligent and, if I may say so, brilliant leaders of men that I have met. He was very quick to understand and he was very quick to react, and among his

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qualities the one which impressed me most was his very keen desire to find a compromise, and his very keen desire to understand.

BRANDON: Did you feel he had a real understanding for the forces that are at large in this world?

THANT: I think he had.

BRANDON: Do you think he knew how to use power?

THANT: What do you mean by the use of power — military power?

BRANDON: Yes, and — and presidential power.

THANT: I think he did. And he was one on whom you can rely. As I have stated a moment ago, his supreme achievement in my view was the very significant improvement in East-West relations. I think it was a subject which was very close to his heart and, as I have stated a moment ago also, he was endowed with extraordinary qualities of patience, firmness and conciliation. I think the partial Test Ban Treaty of August 1963 could be attributed to him as well as to Chairman Khrushchev. Although, of course, the value of the Test Ban Treaty is primarily symbolic of the



improvement in East-West relations, in practical terms it augurs very well for subsequent agreements in the field of disarmament.

BRANDON: Apart from the problem of Southeast Asia, did he ever ask you about your point of view on, say, the Soviet Union or other countries?

THANT: No, I don't remember.

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BRANDON: Did he ask you about the great problem of China?

THANT: No, I don't think so.

BRANDON: Or Chinese admission to the United Nations?

THANT: No, he did not bring this p.

BRANDON: The future of Japan?

THANT: No.

BRANDON: India?

THANT: No, but I think either at the Washington luncheon or my luncheon at the U.N., he asked me about the developments in my own country, and he told me that he had invited the Head of the Revolutionary Government, General Ne Win, to visit Washington and that he was still awaiting a reply. And he told me that he very much hoped that he would be able to make the visit. And I do not think he brought up the situation in any particular country in the course of our discussions.

BRANDON: In that connection, he did not talk about the so-called "third force" in the world, the neutral bloc?

THANT: I do not remember; I do not think so.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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