Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore) Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/12/1965

Administrative Information

Creator: Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore)
Interviewer: Richard E. Neustadt
Date of Interview: March 12, 1965
Length: 88 pages

Biographical Note

Lord Harlech was the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the United Kingdom from 1957 to 1961, and the United Kingdom's Ambassador to the United States from 1961 to 1965. In this interview, Lord Harlech discusses John F. Kennedy's [JFK] early opinions on disarmament; dealings with Nikita S. Khrushchev and the Soviet Union; the Cuban crisis; issues with selling and testing American missiles; how JFK's relationship with British Prime Minister M. Harold Macmillan developed over time and how they worked together on specific issues; how JFK's interest in politics and foreign affairs developed; difficulties with France over their nuclear program in 1962; JFK's skills and character; JFK's different circles of friends; and JFK and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis' approaches to life in the public eye, among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

Copyright of this transcript has been retained by the donor. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character

recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation
Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore), recorded interview by Richard E. Neustadt, March 12, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

66-51

Presentation by The Lord Harlech to
the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library
of Transcript of Interview between
The Lord Harlech and Professor
Richard Neustadt

I, WILLIAM DAVID ORMSBY GORE, Fifth Baron Harlech, hereby present to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library and for administration therein by the authorities thereof a Transcript approved by me on the 12th of March, 1965 of an interview between myself and Professor Richard Neustadt which was prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The presentation of this document is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

(One) Title to the material transferred hereunder and all literary rights will be retained by myself and my heirs in perpetuity;

(Two) It is my wish to make the material presented to the United States of America by the terms of the instrument available for research in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. At the same time it is my wish to guard against the possibility of its contents being used to embarrass, damage, injure or harass anyone. Therefore, in pursuance of this objective, I stipulate that this material shall not for a period of fifty years be made available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorisation to examine it. This restriction shall not apply to employees of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library engaged in performing normal archival work processes;

/ (Three)

(Three) A revision of the above stipulation governing access to the aforesaid document may be entered into between myself and the Archivist of the United States or his designee if it appears desirable to revise the conditions herein stipulated;

(Four) I hereby designate Messrs. Longueville & Company, Solicitors, of 3 Upper Brook Street, Oswestry, Shropshire, to have, after my death, the same authority with respect to authorising access to the aforesaid document as I have reserved to myself in paragraph 2 and paragraph 3 above. In exercising this authority they should act after consultation with my heirs and successors;

(Five) The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

Christopher Ewart Witness
British Embassy, Washington
Member of H.M. Diplomatic Service

Harlech

Charles T. Morrissey Witness
Chief, John F. Kennedy Library
Oral History Project

Wayne C. Grover
Archivist of the United States
3-22-65

Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore) – JFK #1
Table of Contents

Oral History Interview

With

LORD HARLECH (WILLIAM DAVID ORMSBY-GORE)

March 12, 1965

By Richard E. Neustadt

For the John F. Kennedy Library Library

NEUSTADT: This is the first reel of an interview with the British Ambassador, Lord Harlech and Richard Neustadt on John F. Kennedy.

Ambassador, you were beginning to tell me about your first contact with President Kennedy before his election on the issue of disarmament and total relations between the nuclear powers.

HARLECH: Yes, I think it was in the autumn of 1959 I was over here in the United States for the United Nations Assembly meetings, and we met in New York. At that time I was leading our Delegation at the Disarmament Talks in Geneva, particularly on nuclear test ban. Kennedy asked me how they were going and what I thought might come out of them and I explained in great detail the situation I thought we had arrived at in that particular negotiation. I thought that if the United States could make certain changes in their position there was a real possibility that the Soviet Union might want a test ban treaty at that time. He was very interested and asked me to send him a memorandum which I did outlining this position.

NEUSTADT: Go ahead.

HARLECH: He became more interested in it. We had some correspondence and I noticed in certain speeches he made after that that he did make it quite a

theme—the idea that there might be the possibility of agreements with the Soviet Union. Well then in the early part of 1960 I again had to come out to Washington in order to prepare for some more negotiations on disarmament which we were going to have at Geneva. I discovered at that time that the United States position had not been very carefully worked out. They had had a committee studying the problem and hadn't been very happy about the report which was

[-1-]

produced by this committee, and we had a rather difficult time among the Western Powers deciding on a position which we could all take up when we met the Russians in March. While I was in Washington I again saw Kennedy at his house down in Georgetown and we had a further discussion about this and I described the situation as I discovered it in Washington and he was obviously very concerned. That was the first time I think I remember him wondering out loud whether there shouldn't be more machinery in the American government for studying all the arms control and disarmament problems because he thought this ought to be a part of United States policy and that it perhaps hadn't been given enough attention in the past. I only had a rather brief conversation with him on that occasion—just one evening—because he was setting off to Wisconsin to start his primary campaign at that time. In fact he left late at night in order to be at the factory gates in Wisconsin at half-past five the following morning. Then I didn't see him again until the election time in the autumn.

NEUSTADT: Before you go on let's just check where we are—tell me if you will, what he saw in arms control, disarmament negotiations at this point.

HARLECH: He was interested. I think he felt like most—I like to think most rational people felt—that the security of a country is not necessarily improved by simply looking at your defense budget and deciding how much you can spend on arms. If there was a possibility of finding a mutual interest in getting defense budgets turning downwards, this was something which was to the benefit both of the United States and the Soviet Union. Being a very rational man himself he was

[-2-]

convinced that there was mutual benefit here to both sides and if you could come up with proposals which improved the security both of your side and the Soviet side at the same time this would be something on which reasonable men could reach agreement. I think this was the basic philosophy behind it. In the short term he was also concerned that the United States when they had negotiations with the Soviet Union—and we were bound to have negotiations on disarmament—there was tremendous pressure for it at the United Nations and among most of the other members of the Western Alliance—when we went into those negotiations in the United States really should give a lead and have well prepared positions which had not

always been true in the past. He was very anxious that they should not make those kind of mistakes again.

NEUSTADT: Of course, a good deal of that sort of criticism was in the public domain here and you heard a good deal more I imagine. You could lend color and versability to the sort of press criticisms.

HARLECH: Yes I would suppose the pressure for disarmament was a good deal stronger in the United Kingdom than it was over here in the United States. But nevertheless, the United States felt it right to enter into these various negotiations and the 1960 example was a particularly bad one of having to get into a negotiation with no very well worked out American position or even a Western position.

NEUSTADT: Right after the election several people were in Moscow, several people with connections with the President-elect and came back with a variety of hopeful reports. Were you in touch with him during that stage—November-December?

HARLECH: I was. Not for any great length of time. I did see him in New York. We had lunch alone together one day when he was up in New York. We mostly discussed United Nations affairs but he did tell me that people like Jerry Wiesner [Jerome B. Wiesner] were off to Moscow and we had a brief talk. But of course they had not yet sent back any reports as to how they had got on and therefore we did not get into any detailed discussion until later on.

NEUSTADT: I have the impression that in the period from then to inauguration, or for a few weeks after there was a great deal of hope that some sort of break through could be achieved quickly. He thought thereby to get relations on a stabler footing while he worked on establishing his own government. This hopefulness, if it existed, disappeared from between say February and Vienna. Were you in touch at all over that turn?

HARLECH: Yes, I was because again I had to come over because we were going back with a new team to the Nuclear Test Ban talks. Arthur Dean [Arthur Hobson Dean] was made head of the U.S. Delegation (while I remained head of ours) and it was recognized that with a new Administration new proposals would be expected when we met again. So I came over here and saw the President on that occasion and of course we discussed it in great detail and in fact at that stage we made practically all the changes in the Western position which I thought were necessary in order for us to have any hope of agreement with the Soviet Union. I was very disappointed when having put these forward it became quite clear that the Soviet position had hardened considerably. This was by I suppose about March, and why this happened I think did puzzle Kennedy. Of course, as I remember

it, he was advised that while extending the possibility of fruitful negotiation with the Soviet Union and saying that he was always ready to parley with them and after the exchange of the U-2 pilot and so on—that side of it seemed to be going very well—he was advised at the same time to make some rather tough statements about beefing up the American armed forces and "carrying a big stick" was the phrase in vogue. What exactly it was that evidently changed Khrushchev's [Nikita S. Khrushchev] attitude between the kind of letters he wrote in January and the kind of position he adopted by say March, I do not quite know and I think Kennedy always puzzled over it a good deal. In puzzling over it I have the impression that the President was a bit doubtful whether it had been wise to balance the more forthcoming statements with quite so much belligerence at the same time.

NEUSTADT: That was the first arms buildup, the one that came with the budget revisions, not the one that came in the summer.

HARLECH: Of course nothing was very straight forward or simple. There were other things happening in the world that made it almost inevitable that relations between the United States and the Soviet Union would not improve very rapidly at that time and a main factor here was Hammarskjöld's [Dag Hjalmar Agne Carl Hammarskjöld] position. You remember at that time the Soviet Union were violently attacking the Secretary General of the United Nations—they must have a Troika and that a single man was never neutral and so on. Now the United States had quite rightly to take up a very strong position in favor of a single Secretary General and demand that the Charter of the United Nations should be carried out as

it was written that we could not have those kind of changes which would introduce the veto into the working of the Secretariat. This made it really impossible for us to make progress at that moment on the test ban treaty, because, while we had agreed up till then with the Soviet Union that there should be a single administrator of the control body, they came back and said that they really could not pay much attention to our other concessions because what they must now demand was three administrators, one Soviet appointed who would have a veto over the whole organization. This made it impossible for us to make progress with the nuclear test ban negotiations at that time and it was a great disappointment to President Kennedy because, as you know, he thought this was one area in which we seemed to be on the verge of an agreement. By the time the Vienna meeting came along and he again got no change out of Khrushchev on the test ban treaty this most hopeful opening seemed to have closed for him.

NEUSTADT: Did he talk to you at all about the Vienna meeting?

HARLECH: Yes he did. He came through London very briefly directly after Vienna

and he was obviously in great pain at that time because his back was extremely bad. I think he had been very worn out by first the official visit to Paris followed by these very tough negotiations with Khrushchev. There is no doubt that Khrushchev made a very unpleasant impression on him on that occasion. This is what he said to me when he came to London, that it had been a most disagreeable interview, that Khrushchev obviously tried to browbeat him and frighten him. He had displayed the naked power of the

[-6-]

Soviet Union and this had all been extremely unpleasant and quite unlike what he had hoped their first meeting would be—that they would try to find areas of agreement, instead of which on Berlin and on the test ban treaty it was a very negative result—the only slight crumb of comfort was the Laos Agreement which did not seem to be sticking too well. Of course in London he was mainly worried as to how he was to put this to the American people and that night, at dinner at Buckingham Palace—the Queen [Elizabeth II, Queen of Great Britain] gave a dinner for him—he was very concerned about preparing for his television broadcast as soon as he got back. He thought it right that the American people should be told immediately what the real position was between the Soviet Union and the United States. I think it was one of his characteristics, how quickly he adjusted to the unpleasant truths of the situation. In view of the way the meeting had been built up—it was the first contact between the new President of the United States and Mr. Khrushchev—and in view of his hopeful statements earlier in the year, that they could work out some way of living together in this world, it might have been very easy to try and emphasize just the good points of the discussion and say they had reached some agreement on Laos and of course the other things were very difficult but they would work away at them. But not a bit of it, he immediately said the meeting had gone very badly, the American people should know and we must pursue a policy which meets these very unpleasant and harsh truths which have now been revealed to me. Then followed a worsening of the situation in Berlin, the buildup of forces in Europe, a much tougher attitude and this was certainly contrary to his inclinations. He had hoped that

[-7-]

things would go a different way.

NEUSTADT: He didn’t cry over the spilt milk?

HARLECH: Absolutely not. He just took the position as it was now revealed to him and operated from there—but he never lost sight of his original purpose which was that whenever an opening did appear and it seemed right for the United States to take advantage of that opening to try and reestablish a better relationship with the Soviet Union. He managed to come back to this again and again later on.

NEUSTADT: Did he ever say anything to you about one exchange he evidently had with Khrushchev about miscalculation?

HARLECH: No. Was this in the Berlin context chiefly?

NEUSTADT: It was apparently at lunch in Vienna. He spoke of Stalin's [Joseph Stalin] miscalculation in Korea, then Truman's [Harry S. Truman] miscalculation in Korea and his own miscalculation regarding the Cubans and wanted to know if the Russians hadn't done the same thing and of course gotten into a spot.

HARLECH: No.

NEUSTADT: It would interest me only because this is a theme he kept returning to later on—the human deficiencies of governments.

HARLECH: I quite agree. The other theme which that illustrates is that you very rarely have a completely clean sheet on your side. That is to say sometimes if I were to say to him did you see the very unpleasant speech which Marshal Malinovsky [Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky] has just made. He would say yes and I am not too sure that one or two of our generals haven't been making some rather unpleasant speeches. Not quite finding the excuse for the opposition but realizing that if you simply take the situation and add up all the wrongs of the other side you haven't really got a fair balance sheet and that you

[-8-]

ought to examine yourself to see whether some mistakes haven't been made on your side which have added to the complications of the situation. He was always extraordinarily fair-minded on that. Even when he had used the strongest language about the behavior of somebody like Krishna Menon [Vengalil Krishnan Krishna Menon] or one of the Soviet leaders, he would usually balance it by saying look, from their point of view, what we have done elsewhere.

NEUSTADT: He had an extraordinary capacity. I don't know anyone in high office that had that observership that went along with it.

HARLECH: I know. Even when you had a meeting on a topic where he wanted to reach a conclusion which was obviously going to be popular with the people in the room and that he thought was the right conclusion, he never allowed the meeting to end without putting the contrary arguments, sometimes very unpleasant ones which made it even possible that the decision which we were all trying to reach would not in fact be reached. That is to say to take an instance like the Test Ban Treaty. He wanted to have a Test Ban Treaty. There were all these technical complications in regard to it. He would very readily examine the possibilities of certain moves by the United States side which would make it easier for the Soviet Union to agree. He would want to make those moves but then he would suddenly say that if we do this some scientists will come along and show that by muffling the explosions in a large hole underground, the truth of the matter is

that the Russians could be exploding very large yield weapons underground without being detected and this will blow the whole of our case up. Now he actually wanted to make the concession but he would always probe deeply into the

[-9-]

arguments against making that particular concession.

NEUSTADT: Is it your impression that the thing that happened just before the end of the Bay of Pigs had something to do with his custom thereafter or was this native to him all along?

HARLECH: I think that it was native to him all along. I remember back in 1954 staying up at Hyannis Port for the weekend—it was just before he went in to have the operation on his back, and I think he was working on *Profiles in Courage*, he must have been getting near the end of the book—but one of the lessons he had drawn from examining these moments in American history was that there were very much two sides to each problem. Now this didn't prevent him being capable of taking decisions, and knowing that somebody had to make decisions but it did always prevent him saying, "I know that I have got nothing but right on my side and the other side is entirely wrong" and he never would adopt that attitude. He said that one of the rather sad things about life, particularly if you were a politician, was that you discovered that the other side really had a very good case. He was most unpartisan in that way. This went back certainly to 1954 when he made this particular point. He wondered whether he was really cut out to be a politician because he was often so impressed by the other side's arguments when he really examined them in detail. Of course, he thought nothing of them if they were just the usual sort of partisan speech attacking his position on something, but where he thought that there was a valid case against his position, he was always rather impressed by the arguments advanced.

NEUSTADT: Yet this did not make him indecisive?

[-10-]

HARLECH: Not a bit. Not a bit, he knew that if you were President of the United States or indeed had any position in public life, for good or evil, somebody had to make decisions and you had the responsibility of making decisions. You did your best but you would be foolish to assume that you were omnipotent and all-seeing or that you were necessarily always right. The best you could hope for was that you were likely to be right more often than somebody else. It shows a considerable degree of humility in the conduct of human affairs. He felt that people who thought that it was simple and that the answers were obvious were dangerous people.

NEUSTADT: Well this is evidently what underlay his perception of general war by mutual miscalculation and it was a very keen perception and his awareness

of the interlocking of misjudgments and his capacity to make misjudgments.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: And the capacity of machines to roll along on their own momentum. I found this extraordinary—very sharp.

HARLECH: I think it is very true. I think also nobody quite realizes the fearful responsibility which you have when you have under your command this vast nuclear potential. Anybody else can view the situation with just some measure of detachment because he or she is not going to make the final decision. The President of the United States is put in positions where he knows that a situation could develop in a matter of hours—during the Cuban crisis for instance in which he would have to face up to this appalling decision of starting a nuclear exchange. I don't think I have ever seen

him more irritated than when he was describing how people talked rather glibly about the escalation that might take place—with apparently no deep understanding of just what it would entail.

NEUSTADT: Had this sharp perception hit him as early as the Berlin crisis that first summer?

HARLECH: Of course I saw him less that first summer because I didn't come here as Ambassador until the autumn. In fact the only exchanges which we had after my visit to Washington in February were either through letters or when he was in London briefly in June—so I don't know about that. I would have thought he always had it. It was very much in his character—perhaps that Berlin crisis first made him think more deeply about it and by the time Cuba came along it was very much part of his whole philosophy. I mean I have known him saying on occasions during the Cuban crisis that this world really is impossible to manage so long as we have nuclear weapons. Just the clash of human wills being connected to weapons which can wipe out millions of people is really a terrible way to have to live in this world. This is, I think, what made him deeply interested in disarmament and the more so when he saw what it was like conducting affairs with both sides, under certain circumstances, threatening the use of these appalling weapons.

NEUSTADT: You saw him a good bit did you during the two weeks of the Cuban thing?

HARLECH: Yes I saw him particularly from the moment it became really critical—that is to say when he got back on the Saturday from Chicago. I didn't see him

that day but he telephoned on Sunday morning and said would I come down to the White House—I think it was about twelve o'clock on Sunday morning. He had had some meetings and I went up to

[-12-]

the drawing room and sat there and waited for him to come out and we sat there for a very long time that morning—until about half-past one when Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis] returned with the children from the country—he wanted her and the children to be there when he was making these awful decisions. They arrived and I went in to see them start lunch before leaving. During that talk we went very frankly into all the possible repercussions—the repercussions in Berlin, the way the Soviets might put the squeeze on us in Berlin, the weakness of our conventional military position over Berlin, the difficulty of maintaining it there unless you were prepared to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. Therefore the chain of events, was a very typical example of the chain of events which could occur—the United States feeling bound to take action over the missiles in Cuba, the Soviet Union holding certain cards in their hand; if they were unconvinced about the determination of the United States, they might decide to raise the bidding by putting the squeeze on us in Berlin—quite a likely possibility where they had better cards than we did. If this happened then the United States had to show their determination again by threatening the use of nuclear weapons to defend Berlin—we could have been by the end of that week in an extraordinarily dangerous position—nuclear war that week certainly was not excluded from his mind.

NEUSTADT: But it was never the Ruskean apocalyptic vision—from the first step to nuclear war, he was worrying about the escalation after next.

HARLECH: Yes, I think so.

NEUSTADT: Yes, very sound.

[-13-]

HARLECH: Of course by then he had had long discussions with his advisers about all the alternative policies the United States might pursue in those circumstances and by that Sunday he had worked out in his own mind just what particular courses might lead to and there were one or two modifications which he made during the subsequent twenty-four hours.

[END OF FIRST SIDE OF THE FIRST TAPE]

NEUSTADT: Second side of the first tape—Interview with the British Ambassador, Lord Harlech on John F. Kennedy.

We were talking about your conversation on the Sunday of the closed week over the Cuban affair. How much faith did he seem to have about the utility of the blockade, which I take it by that time he had decided more or less...

HARLECH: More or less decided. At that time it was still thought right to include in the blockade all petrol and oil going into Cuba, which was subsequently dropped. It was kept in reserve. I don't think that at that moment he had decided how far it would be necessary to go before the Russians would recognize the determination of the United States to force them to take their missiles out of Cuba. He was anxious that the first decisions taken by the United States should send a pretty clear signal to Moscow. It was no good taking half measures because then they would immediately assume that there was rather a weak position in the United States. On the other hand it shouldn't be so belligerent that it put Khrushchev in a position where he really couldn't back down without terrible loss of face. I think the whole adjustment of the United States position was to find the exact median line between too belligerent an approach and too

[-14-]

weak a one which might only encourage the Russians to think that they could face down the United States. But he put the problem to me in a very characteristic way. When I came into the room I had a pretty good idea of what was already happening. We had had various indications of it from the CIA but I didn't know precisely and he just filled me in on exactly what the picture was that these U-2 flights had shown up; the existence of the missiles; that they had then checked on them and there was now no doubt about it that they were offensive missiles and that they had a certain capability and that there would be this number by such and such a date and what the estimates were and what was the United States to do about it. Then he posed to me alternative policies without indicating which policies he was in favor of and he then said which do you think would be right and I said that I thought that bombing—an immediate strike would not be understood in the rest of the world and that some form of blockade was probably the right answer. He said as a matter of face that is what we have decided but then hurried on to say that you realize that if we do this now we may have lost one opportunity which will be open to us to take really strong action against Castro [Fidel Castro]. Have you fully examined the wisdom of passing up this chance of taking stronger action because Castro might not make the same mistake again and here he has been caught in a flagrant act which is contrary to the interests of the United States and so on. He, therefore, did his devil's advocate act even at that stage. Then we went and had dinner with him that night in the White House and had some more talk about it. It was Tuesday night when I saw him again—again we went to have dinner. He had in fact arranged a party for Tuesday night which had to

[-15-]

be cancelled but a few of those who had come long distances for the party went and had dinner at the White House. After dinner that Tuesday night, I went and sat with him alone at the end of the Long Gallery and when we had been talking for a time Bobby Kennedy

[Robert F. Kennedy] came and joined us and we went on till quite late. On that occasion we started by discussing the rather bad reaction in Europe to his speech and to his disclosure of what had happened and at their disbelief in the word of the CIA—it had a bad name. Were there not ways by which the European newspapers and European public opinion could be persuaded of the truth of the United States' statements? At that moment most of the photographs of the missile sites were not being released, they had been shown to some of the press in America but were not available to the press in London or Paris or anywhere else and I urged him very strongly that these should be immediately released and we had piles and piles of them brought up from downstairs to try and decide which were the most impressive ones and which were the ones which should be released. Zorin [Valerian Zorin] had spoken in the Security Council just as we were going to dinner and there was some difference of opinion as to what line he had taken. We discussed that. Bobby had been to see Dobrynin [Anatoly Fedorovich Dobrynin] that evening and came back to report that as far as Dobrynin knew the Soviet Union's orders were for their ships to go on in to Cuba. Well then we got into a discussion about at what point should these Russian ships be intercepted. Now it was quite possible having pinpointed where these ships carrying military material were in the Atlantic for the United States to send out destroyers and intercept them a long way out from Cuba and we got into this talk about how wise that would be. What would be an optimum distance out and of course during that week there really

[-16-]

wasn't time for me to get instructions from London and I argued rather strongly that I thought they ought to be allowed to come pretty close into Cuba as this would give the Russians a little bit more time to consider the situation's developing and perhaps get orders out to their ships to turn round. The President then got on to Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and asked why it was that the decision had been taken to intercept them—I can't now remember the distances but it was something like 500 and might even be as far as 700 miles out and the only answer, as far as I can remember was that the military said that if they were allowed to come closer in planes from Cuba might take part in the clash that took place and this was undesirable. Therefore if they were out of range of Cuban aircraft this would be better but the President was very unimpressed by this argument and said that he wanted this thing studied again as he saw that there was great value in allowing the Russians rather more time to consider their next action. Then there was the terrible Wednesday morning when we all sat with our hearts in our mouths to see whether any of the Russian ships did turn round and of course sure enough at one stage in the morning, the first reports came that they were turning. But he was very remarkable during that week. I think that everybody who worked with him during that week conceived this fantastic admiration for him; the way he kept his humor, the way he could make the decisions at the exact time they were needed, the way he could listen to a vast quantity of contradictory advice and come out with what everybody at the end of the day decided was exactly the right action.

[-17-]

NEUSTADT: Did he talk to you at all about the administrative control problem he

faced? His actions suggested that he was terribly conscious of it.

HARLECH: I think that is true. He was very conscious of it but, on the other hand, the little group that was assembled to act as the sort of executive body, I thought worked very well and I got the impression that he thought that it had worked pretty well. He may have worried about whether it could be perfected still more.

NEUSTADT: I was thinking of the issue one level down. How you get the decisions out to them, the military.

HARLECH: He told me that very amusing story. I expect you have heard it before. It shows his attention to detail at a time like this. He suddenly was worried about what might happen if the Cubans decided to do a sort of Pearl Harbor—that is to say that while the American forces were assembling they might suddenly strike. Had the right dispositions been made by the United States? He suddenly thought in his mind I wonder whether all those fighter planes down in Florida are all drawn up in their usual lines on the tarmac because then one Cuban plane could knock out the entire base by going straight down the line machine-gunning the lot. He said I think I had better just check it with Bob McNamara. So he got on to Bob McNamara and said, "Look I want a photo reconnaissance taken of those bases to see whether the Commanders are acting sensibly over dispersal," and Bob McNamara said that there was absolutely no need: "I can assure you that of course they will have dispersed their aircraft." But Kennedy said, "I would just like to have a check—you send down a photo-reconnaissance plane and just check up on those bases." They flew over and all the planes were in line up and down the runway.

NEUSTADT: I hadn't heard that before, and it is very characteristic. He had grasped this as nobody else I have ever known had grasped it.

HARLECH: He was, as you know, and this relates to this particular point, he was terribly worried as to how does the Chief Executive ensure that his policies are being carried out down the line. Another example of things going wrong was after the great Skybolt [Douglas GAM-87 Skybolt air-launched ballistic missile] debates at Nassau. We came back together to Palm Beach and woke up in the morning to hear the news that the Skybolt had been fired and that the Air Force were claiming that it had been one hundred percent successful, which proved in fact not to be the case—but this was the first story. He just couldn't believe that this could have happened. How anybody could have authorized the testing of that missile just at the moment when he and Harold Macmillan [M. Harold Macmillan] had decided to dump Skybolt and then claim a one hundred percent success. He went through the roof. Luckily for poor Bob McNamara he was flying out to Colorado for a skiing holiday and the wretched Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric] got the full fury of the story.

NEUSTADT: Yes, he told me that.

HARLECH: —just a little commentary on that. I must say that the scene was very curious. The sort of thing that happens now in modern life. Very exhausting those talks in Nassau and the President had said that he had really never been through such a tough two days of negotiations and we were sitting by the pool at Palm Beach behind his house ready to have a swim when the crisis burst. He was having a manicure with a manicurist sitting beside him and Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] taking some dictation and there we were—this wonderful sunny scene beside the pool and suddenly this

[-19-]

vast explosion and this violent language going out down the telephone while the wretched manicurist went on cutting his nails.

NEUSTADT: This is wonderful. I am very vivid about this fellow. I can see that pretty well. Were you involved at all in the upset over the Jupiters [Chrysler PGM-19 Jupiter medium-range ballistic missile] in Turkey?

HARLECH: No.

NEUSTADT: That was another case where he felt that the machine had let him down.

HARLECH: There was another case over the selling of American missiles to Israel in the summer of 1962 I suppose it was. This had been a very delicate problem—the whole arms question in the Middle East and what ought to be given to the Israelis and what ought to be given to the Arabs. We thought we had a very clear understanding that before either of us sold any missiles, admittedly defensive missiles to Israel, we should concert together and decide whether this was really wise or whether this might not simply set off an arms race in the Middle East. Well suddenly out of the blue we heard that the United States had offered Hawk missiles [Raytheon MIM-23 Hawk medium-range surface-to-air missile] to Israel. I was in England at the time, as a matter of fact, shooting in Yorkshire with the Prime Minister [Macmillan]. The Prime Minister came back rather tired from the Moors one evening to find a telegram to say that this is what had happened. He was very angry and sent off a rather intemperate telegram to the President about what had happened. I think the President was rather upset about it—that Macmillan hadn't checked up to find out just how it had happened. Partly I think he was rather hurt by the Prime Minister's telegram, but also he was furious with the

[-20-]

machine in Washington for allowing this kind of a situation to develop in which the Prime Minister could accuse him of acting in bad faith after the understanding we had had. Well I mean it is the problem which I am sure you talked with him about—how in the complications of the modern world do you keep an eye on all these details—whether it is the firing of

Skybolt, the selling of missiles, you really can't do it all yourself, you have to trust other people. How do you ensure that they don't make gross errors of judgment?

NEUSTADT: Well in the Cuban thing the instrumentalities picked, that happened to be successful, were the most controllable he could have used.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: I expect his concern rate would have gone up enormously if he had had to move to another stage.

HARLECH: Yes. I suppose that is true. Of course, Cuba or any crisis of that intensity makes it easier because everybody focuses on the problem—there is a direct order of priorities. This is what everybody will concentrate on for the time being and you can pretty well ensure that the instructions go down and are carried out properly. But in day to day conduct of foreign policy or indeed in the internal policy so much as got to be left to others—you have got to assume that other people carry out your broad directives. You can't keep an eye on them all. I think the answer is that if somebody makes mistakes too often you sack him. I don't know of any other method of...

NEUSTADT: Do you think he had gotten rather reconciled to that?

HARLECH: I think he had, although, as you know, he

really disliked sacking people.

NEUSTADT: Oh yes, I know.

HARLECH: Even people he knew had really not proved a success he was very reluctant to get rid of. I think this is something that everybody who reaches the top position finds is very difficult to begin with but in the end they find themselves more and more having to steel themselves to take these very unpleasant decisions.

NEUSTADT: Coming back to Berlin unless, if I haven't exhausted you on Cuba you should stick to it.

HARLECH: No. That's all.

NEUSTADT: Had you arrived by the time the wall went up.... You came after that.

HARLECH: No. That was in August. No, I came after that.

NEUSTADT: Taking it up in October. This was a period in which the President had been criticized by numerous people, particularly Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop], for indecisiveness, for listening to too many sources of advice, for opening the town up too wide, not knowing his own mind. Dean Acheson's [Dean G. Acheson] firmness was publicly paraded. I always had the feeling, although I was abroad then, that there was something cockeyed about that picture.

HARLECH: I think there was. Although of course this all took place at a period, certainly from August onwards, when I think he was less confident about Dean Acheson's judgment, having started off being perhaps rather over-influenced by Dean Acheson in the spring. By mid-summer he had more or less decided that it would not be wise to rely too much on Dean Acheson's judgment of this kind of a situation. But taking Joe Alsop as an example he would feel that this was

[-22-]

being indecisive. In my view it was showing good judgment rather than being indecisive and not just being carried along on a particular policy which he had begun to feel probably wasn't the right one. There is no doubt that firmness was required. Certainly the military buildup was valuable but, nevertheless, he still had in mind his major objective which was to try and get back to a better relationship with the Soviet Union and this was an example of how after a crisis of this kind, he always tried to get back on to this road. Which was very true again after Cuba when he got the message from Khrushchev saying that Khrushchev would now accept some inspection for a nuclear test ban. He was very excited by it. It arrived whilst we were in Nassau—and we talked together with the Prime Minister about how we might exploit this offer. But again that ran into the sand. Then, of course, later on that year in the spring many of his advisers told him not to pay too much attention to the Prime Minister who, they said, had got this terrible bee in his bonnet about the nuclear test ban and that it was quite clear that Khrushchev was no longer interested in it. They pointed out that he was going to have these negotiations with the Chinese Communists in July, the summer, and that he would decide nothing before that. This lengthy correspondence with Khrushchev which hadn't been going too well on a test ban was a waste of time. This was pretty solidly the advice he got and he would not accept it. He went along with Harold Macmillan's view that we should try and extract from Khrushchev's letters anything which indicated some possibility of progress, stick to those, not do too much answering back in debating style—

[-23-]

but stick to those elements which were constructive. As a result of that the people were sent off to Moscow—the special representatives. Khrushchev did change his attitude and we did get the test ban.

NEUSTADT: The American University speech had some kind of importance here. It was highly debatable what kind in terms of Moscow. But it did represent I take

it a fixed intent on his side in terms of what he was going to point his finger towards and what his tone was going to be. Did he talk to you at all about that? In the months before?

HARLECH: In the months before we had endless discussions usually centering round the nuclear test ban, because this seemed to be the area in which we could make some progress. But also discussing the whole problem of East-West relations and his determination to actually to try and do something. Not just go through a presidency adequately carrying out the functions but somehow during the course of it—the presidency—changing the course of history and I think that the American University speech was the best exposition of his fundamental feelings about how we might get on to a rather more hopeful path in human history.

NEUSTADT: Did you sense any picture in his head, last summer and fall, of what he saw of the scenario or the sequence for the years ahead following out the theme of that speech?

HARLECH: Well I think that the most significant thing he said to me was that he was determined to visit the Soviet Union. We were at Hyannis Port last summer, this was July 1963—I was up there spending the weekend with him—as a matter of a fact just after we had initialed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty—we hadn't signed it but the initialing had

taken place and Harriman [William Averell Harriman] came back the conquering hero and arrived at the Cape. On Sunday afternoon we were swimming and we met Bobby Kennedy on the beach. We had a discussion about what were the next steps and Bobby, who of course had always been anxious to try and find a way of getting on to a better relationship with the Soviet Union said, in front of me, "I think the President ought to go to the Soviet Union don't you?" I said, "Well as you knew it has always been my view that at some suitable moment this would do a tremendous amount of good and that I always had felt that if President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] had ever been able to carry out his original intention of doing a great swing through the Soviet Union, the fact that an American President had been seen in all the great cities of the Soviet Union, was seen not to have horns and a tail, that he had made speeches indicating the desire of the United States to get on to a better relationship with the Soviet bloc all this would have had a profound effect on the course of history irrespective of whether any precise agreements were arrived at." It did seem to me, and this is what we discussed standing in the sea, that possibly it would be easier to find areas of agreement when you first of all improved the atmosphere. It was very hard to reach hard agreements when the atmosphere of distrust was so intense. The President was fairly non-committal at that moment. However at dinner at the White House, in early November I think it must have been—not more than a few weeks before he was assassinated, he did remind me of that conversation with Bobby Kennedy in the sea and he said, "You know I have made up my mind that one of the things that I really must do is to go to the Soviet Union. I believe

that this would be in everybody's interest—whether I can do it before the presidential elections next year, may be a bit doubtful—I

[-25-]

think the time is going to be difficult but some time I am determined to go."

NEUSTADT: That's useful. Yes, I suppose that would have been after election.

HARLECH: Probably after election. Because you don't know how history would have worked out this spring and summer if he had still been alive but it more likely would have been after election. But the knowledge that this was his wish, that no doubt it could have been communicated to the Russians I think this would have had a considerable effect during this year and certainly would have held out hopes in the years to come.

NEUSTADT: You were away during the height of the wheat deal last fall.

HARLECH: Yes. I was back for most of it.

NEUSTADT: I gather that this was important to him.

HARLECH: Certainly. I think he knew that there would be a certain amount of criticism of his policy in this respect and he was very anxious that it shouldn't be made to look as though we for instance would start selling buses to Cuba because he was selling wheat to the Soviet Union. This was one of the things which disturbed him about the buses to Cuba deal—it would be made to look as though if the United States once starts relaxing in this particular field then other countries would relax their own controls over trading with the Communists and in some particular cases he did not think this was a good idea particularly in the case of Cuba. This was an area I suppose in which there was a considerable possibility of a change in the American position. Increased trade and commercial relations with the Soviet Union was an area where it oughtn't have been too difficult to move. There was the problem that the Soviet Union had very little to sell

[-26-]

to the United States—but nevertheless my impression was that President Kennedy thought that this here was an area in which some movement could take place without any harm to anybody and that this would be in tune with his general philosophy. The wheat deal was obviously the first step in this sort of direction. It always worried me that we had never really had a good general discussion on this problem with the Prime Minister because Harold Macmillan had strong and carefully thought out ideas in this field and indeed had hoped to discuss it at Nassau if Skybolt had not come along to largely monopolize the talks there.

NEUSTADT: This is the second tape, first side, interview by Richard Neustadt with the

British Ambassador, the Lord Harlech, for the John F. Kennedy Library.

Ambassador, one of the things that I find fascinating about Kennedy's presidency is the growth of his relationship with Harold Macmillan, both as a personal matter and as a matter of intergovernmental relations. Starting from a period in which, so far as I know, they didn't know each other, quite different generations, styles, backgrounds in a way, or at least in terms of what were the formative experiences of their young manhood, a different war—wholly a leap in time, to obviously what was a very warm and meaningful relationship. If you could just talk about that, carrying it through, how it evolved—I think it would be very useful to have.

HARLECH: Yes I think that is quite true. I don't think he had ever met the President before he was elected. He had watched him in the television debates because we were all in New York together for the UN Assembly and we watched those debates. He was very impressed by that first debate

[-27-]

there was no doubt about it and having seen the debate he lent across to me and said I think Kennedy is going to win. But he was, of course, very worried about what their relationship was going to be. He had had this long relationship with President Eisenhower, dating back to wartime experiences in North Africa and, although I don't know that his political philosophies were very close together—there was no doubt that Harold Macmillan was on the extreme Liberal wing of the Conservative Party—he was worried about how he was to make this jump you refer to in generations. He was also concerned because of the stories that went around about the influence that the President's father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] had upon him. We knew of Ambassador Kennedy's reports back from London both just before the war and after the war had been begun and there was a general feeling that he had had anti-British sentiments and there was concern as to what extent these affected the thinking of his son. So he was apprehensive about how he would get on. As you know the first meeting they had was I think it was down in Key West. The Prime Minister was on his way to the West Indies for a tour and a critical situation had arisen over Southeast Asia and they both decided that it would be wise for him to call off and have a short meeting with the President. The Prime Minister was apprehensive, as I say, as to whether the President would think he was a funny old man who belonged to the distant past and couldn't understand the problems of the day. I think in fact the meeting went very well. Of course, at that moment President Kennedy's advisers, at least some of them, were against a conference over Laos at which

[-28-]

both the Soviet Union and the Chinese would attend and had been inclined to suggest that the time had come for the United States to intervene with military forces in the area. We knew of this pressure and this was one of the reasons that the Prime Minister was very anxious to meet him and as a result of their meetings, although I think the President's mind was inclining this way in any case, they did decide that the right thing to go for was a conference in Geneva under certain conditions, fairly tough conditions laid down by the United States

which were, I think, perfectly reasonable. So that in a way he was reassured at that moment that the President was not a brash young man who made quick decisions and certainly not somebody who ignored the interest of his allies. So this really went rather well. I don't think they got on very easily on that occasion. There was probably some slight embarrassment on both sides and therefore they didn't speak in the frank way that they did at a later stage.

NEUSTADT: They were feeling each other out.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: Although they each must have felt....

HARLECH: Yes. Exactly, and I suspect—the President never told me this—but I expect he wondered how he would get on...

NEUSTADT: Surely.

HARLECH: ...with this figure who had apparently, apart from anything else, had been very close to President Eisenhower and there was a question of whether he would be measured against President Eisenhower and so on. On the other hand, I think I should say this, that President Eisenhower had been extremely forthright in talking to Kennedy before he came in

and had said that if you want good advice you ask Harold Macmillan—he is somebody who I have always found has got a well-balanced mind, who has got a great feeling for history and is somebody whose advice and counsel is something I have always greatly valued. He had specifically said this to President Kennedy before the inauguration and when I talked to President Kennedy when I was over here, I suppose it was in February of 1961—we had dinner together alone—he told me specifically that he was anxious to meet with Macmillan and told me of the very kind things that President Eisenhower had said about him.

NEUSTADT: One of the striking things about President Kennedy was his extreme courtesy with older people in the encounters I have witnessed. I take it that this held?

HARLECH: Very much so. He had beautiful manners. That he was extremely thoughtful and courteous is quite true. But then of course I think the Prime Minister was rather jarred by the events over the Bay of Pigs. That is to say by the end of April it was very difficult in England to understand just what had happened and why it had happened. It took a longish time to get over what was apparently a gross error of judgment and then there was a feeling I think that over Berlin, perhaps due to the influence of Dean Acheson, the President was perhaps taking an unnecessarily hard line so all these things had built up by the time the President came to London in June. However, there they

had a good talk, although too short. They had all their advisers waiting to start on the talks but the advisers were in fact never asked into the room. I can't now remember what time we

[-30-]

all met at Admiralty House—let us say ten and the two of them talked all the way through to lunchtime with all of us waiting outside; I went in for a few minutes at the very end but that was all. Then we went in to lunch and none of the advisers got a word in—so this I think was the beginning of a much closer understanding.

NEUSTADT: Do you know what they actually—whether some of the things that had been worrying Macmillan came up? Whether he had a chance to talk to him about the Bay of Pigs?

HARLECH: Well I don't think they did get on to the Bay of Pigs on that occasion. As you know, earlier on Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] had come to London to try and explain exactly what had happened and he gave me a very very full account directly from the President of what he wanted the Prime Minister to know and I did talk to the Prime Minister about it at that time and I think this was all water over the dam. Now what had happened was that the President was just arriving back from Vienna and his meetings with Khrushchev and they really had to get down to talk about the Berlin situation, the Test Ban situation and the Southeast Asia situation with regard to Laos and South Vietnam. These were the things that were in their minds and that they dealt with on that occasion.

NEUSTADT: That mission of Arthur's was useful?

HARLECH: I think it was very useful. Extremely useful. As you know, he saw not only members of the government but also members of the opposition and I think it did do a lot to dispel some of the doubts of the English Press in Britain at that time. Of course, everybody had greatly admired the fact that having made a blunder the President immediately took the whole of the blame himself—at a time when various people

[-31-]

were trying to explain their positions and say of course there was this reason and that reason and they hadn't been enthusiastic and so on and within a matter of—I can't now remember—I think it was about twenty-four hours he made a categorical statement that it had been his decision and nobody need start apologizing for their part in the proceedings and he took the whole of the blame. This made a great impression and of course must have given an immense boost to the morale of the people in the Administration. There's nothing which makes you more loyal to a man than somebody who takes the blame even when you know that you share some of it.

NEUSTADT: I thought it was a great political act that recovered. I take it that Macmillan could appreciate it in just those terms?

HARLECH: Very much so. He had this passionate belief in loyalty to someone who was under attack and he in fact often used to say that it was one of the distressing things of political life that when you just thought that a Minister ought to go, usually some ass in the opposition made a violent attack on him, whereupon he had to go down and thump the despatch box and say, "A more brilliant and loyal member of the government team I have never known in my life," and there the Minister was for another year. But he always did it of course and it was something that he had learnt, partly from his wartime experiences and so on—that the commanding officer must show loyalty to his junior officers and this would have certainly sounded a very responsive chord in Harold Macmillan—the President's actions after the Bay of Pigs disaster.

NEUSTADT: I do see that. The Laotian thing thereupon was got out of, I guess that is the best way to put it.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: Just barely.

HARLECH: It was put more or less into cold storage and worked for a time quite successfully, certainly I think it was worth doing at that particular moment in history. That was, of course, the only good feature of East-West relations during the whole of 1961.

NEUSTADT: I had a talk with Kennedy just after he came back I guess and his concern about the other course he'd have to take if the conference formula didn't work was truly immense. I think the Bay of Pigs in that sense was very much in his mind. He didn't have a sense that he could....

HARLECH: No, try another gamble with military forces. Apart from anything else the military forces were not in all that good shape at that time. With a crisis on over Berlin and not too many ready divisions—there were a certain number of divisions on paper but not very combat-ready divisions available. He just thought that this was a bad strategic decision to make—to commit forces which were rather limited in number in an area where results might be very hard to come by.

NEUSTADT: This I take it first was a view that was fully shared by Macmillan.

HARLECH: Very much so.

NEUSTADT: Over the Berlin thing, what were the fears on Macmillan's side?

HARLECH: I don't know that they were exactly fears—I think there was a feeling that we had not tried to make real contact with the Russians to see whether we couldn't work out a *modus vivendi* which would get us over the next two or three years on access to Berlin. Then perhaps the whole situation would be calmer and we would get out of this particular crisis. I think that once it became clear by June

[-33-]

of 1961 that Khrushchev was putting the pressure on Kennedy, Macmillan wholly agreed that it was right to resist that pressure but he was also anxious to find some way in which we could get back into contact with Khrushchev and try and persuade him to pursue a more sensible course of looking for some kind of an agreement which would tide us over the few critical years ahead. It was in this respect that the kind of advice he thought Kennedy was getting, which was just to build up the Western strength and not attempt to make contact with Khrushchev directly—this is what worried him and during the autumn of 1961 we were in favor of trying to get going some kind of negotiations—at least contacts with the Soviet Union, which was rather resisted by the French and the Germans. It was this kind of a message that he wanted to get across. While with one hand you stood firm, refused to be browbeaten by the Russians, nevertheless, you did indicate to them that you thought that there were solutions to the problem which could be worked out by sensible people sitting together in a room and that just standing on either side blustering and waving your rockets at each other was not a good way to get out of this particular problem.

NEUSTADT: Now in addition to this meeting in June, was there direct contact between them over the summer?

HARLECH: No. There were messages exchanged and so on but no further direct contact. No, the next meeting they had was at the Bermuda Conference in December which was after I had become Ambassador here. I arrived at the end of October and we set up this meeting in the course of November for discussions at Bermuda. Those discussions were, of course, deliberately

[-34-]

arranged in what is known as country-house conditions, that is to say, they stayed together in the same house—the governor's house on Bermuda—I don't think the President found it very comfortable—but in other respects it worked very well.

NEUSTADT: The last time he was ever asked to arrange housing!

HARLECH: It wasn't only that the room was rather limited but that the President complained that he couldn't get any hot water to shave! When we came to arrange further meetings he was very insistent that the governor's house at Bermuda was not one of the places he would care to stay in. But from the respect of getting

to know each other of course it was ideal in that they lived in the same house—other than breakfast we had every meal together and the discussions took place in rather a small drawing room and went on all the morning and all the afternoon. This was, I would say, the first occasion on which they really sized each other up and decided that they very much liked each other's company. There is no doubt about it they laughed at each other's jokes, they were amused by each other's turn of phrase, they felt an instinctive belief that the other shared the same kind of philosophy of life, the same objectives in their government policies, both as regards East-West relations and as to what they were trying to do at home in their own political spheres. They, I think, found themselves very close together in their outlooks on life and this of course was a tremendous relief to Harold Macmillan who, as I have indicated, was feeling that they were miles apart in age and in upbringing, in background. Nevertheless, having started from these different positions their outlook on the world was extremely similar.

NEUSTADT: Was this the point that Kennedy became appreciative of Macmillan as a political animal? It was clear he did.

HARLECH: I think so. Macmillan expounded at certain moments on things like the necessity for a nuclear test ban and the crazy world in which we were living in which we were trying to build 100 megaton bombs, in which we were going to burn up tens of millions of people at one blow and his absolute horror and revulsion that human minds should be directed to that kind of end. He, I think, made this very clear to President Kennedy and he was very impressed by it; the warmth with which he spoke, the breadth of his view about how people, who had positions like he had and the President had, should try and bend history to ensure that it didn't pursue a perfectly crazy course which could lead to the destruction of the human race.

NEUSTADT: Now this became a very deep thing with Kennedy. Is it your impression that these have all been dependent on Macmillan or that they simply found their minds meeting? Or....

HARLECH: I suspect that the instincts were there. I think that probably not many people had talked to President Kennedy in quite those sweeping terms before.

NEUSTADT: That's very interesting.

HARLECH: And I think that this did add a dimension to his thinking.

NEUSTADT: Because he on one occasion talked in shorthand as he always did in very much the same terms as Macmillan and I have often wondered how that whole perspective evolved in his mind.

HARLECH: It is so easy if you are head of an Administration just to act on the problems which suddenly confront you day by day—it's awfully difficult to get rid of those for a time and try and project yourself two or three years into the future—and, if possible, even longer. I think that it was this kind of concept of the role of being the head of a government which Harold Macmillan consistently talked about that did make a deep impression on the President.

NEUSTADT: Now Harold Macmillan had just had an awful mess on his hands over Katanga at home and that was....

HARLECH: Yes, that was one of the first things we talked about at Bermuda. There had been this great row over the Congo situation and there was a feeling in Britain that the United Nations was overstepping the bounds of its authority in intervening militarily in order to reduce Katanga and make it submit to the central government, and nobody thought too much of the central government at that time. There had been this very serious crisis for Macmillan in the House of Commons when it became known that he had agreed to supply some bombs for United Nations aircraft and there was an uproar. Fighting had started between UN troops and Katanga troops and a debate was demanded. The Prime Minister sent a message saying that he really thought that unless a stop could be made to this fighting the government might well fall. By chance we were already going to have dinner at the White House the very night that this message arrived and so directly dinner was over I started talking to the President about it. I said really what we needed from the point of view of the British was that U Thant, the Secretary General, should issue a call for a ceasefire and time was

getting very short. We needed this request for a ceasefire the following day, in twelve hours—twenty-four hours at the most. This was an occasion on which Kennedy was wonderful at appreciating the political difficulties of his friends and allies. He believed that Harold Macmillan would not have sent him a message like that unless he was in deep trouble. He thought that this was an occasion on which he could help and he threw the full weight of his authority behind getting the result that Harold Macmillan required. He went straight to the telephone and said, "Get me George Ball [George W. Ball]," who was in charge, I cannot remember where Dean Rusk was at that time, but George Ball was in charge of the State Department. He got him on the telephone, said, "I have got David Gore sitting beside me here, he will explain what it is the British government wants done and I want it done. Here you are." I explained the position, and George Ball said, "Right, I'll get on to Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] in New York straight away and then I'll ring back." We sat by the telephone and had talks with Stevenson and with George Ball—two or three conversations. At the end of that night Adlai Stevenson had been round to see U Thant; the following morning U Thant issued a statement saying that he had called for a ceasefire, the debate went ahead in Parliament.

NEUSTADT: Yes, I was there.

HARLECH: The statement of the ceasefire was read out, the government got a majority of I think 93. I am bound to say that when I saw the President, he said, "Well that was a pretty good majority, I wonder whether we needed to have gone to all that trouble the other night in order to get it?"

NEUSTADT: [Laughter] What was your answer?

HARLECH: I think it might have been very close without that call for the ceasefire.

[-38-]

NEUSTADT: It did work beautifully. I went to that debate.

HARLECH: Were you in London at the time?

NEUSTADT: Yes.

HARLECH: And the feeling was very strong?

NEUSTADT: Yes.

HARLECH: Because from here it was very hard to understand quite why there seemed to be such a high state of excitement in London. But as I say, as soon as I got the Prime Minister's message, I could guess that he and the Chief Whip anyway, thought that they were in deep trouble.

NEUSTADT: The Labor fellows thought for a moment that they really had a chance to get enough backbench Tory abstention to harass the government.

HARLECH: Well really that wall all that was needed.

NEUSTADT: This is side two of tape two, interview by Richard Neustadt with the British Ambassador, Lord Harlech for the Kennedy Library.

One thing interests me with reference to that story of giving Harold Macmillan a helping hand. Kennedy, I take it had a complete grasp of the arithmetic of backbench abstention?

HARLECH: I think he did. Certainly by this time on this particular issue it was fairly well known there was a thing that was called the Katanga Lobby and he knew the makeup of it and presumably he got from London, apart from what I told him, a pretty good run down on what was happening inside the Conservative Party on the Congo issue.

NEUSTADT: Did he understand without prompting this thing which seems very obscure to Americans that a government in Britain doesn't watch its opposition, it watches its backbench?

[-39-]

HARLECH: Oh yes. He understood it perfectly well. In fact he had a considerable grasp of British politics.

NEUSTADT: This is my feeling that he had a great grasp of all kinds of people's politics—I don't know quite where it came from.

HARLECH: No. I suppose particularly British politics because of his reading, *Melbourne* [by David Cecil] being one of his favorite books, and the whole of certainly 19th century British Parliamentary history interested him greatly.

NEUSTADT: Do you know how that got to be one of his favorite books? Do you know the story about it all?

HARLECH: Not at all. I imagined that it was pure chance that he happened to read it and liked it very much. No, I have read descriptions about how it shows a sort of insight into his character; that perhaps in some ways he was rather like Melbourne [Melbourne, William Lamb, Viscount]. I think they are very farfetched.

NEUSTADT: Yes, so do I.

HARLECH: Apart from anything else Melbourne was very indecisive. He on the whole believed in putting off decisions rather than taking them. But I think to this extent it's true—this ability to stand back from the battle and appraise coolly what was happening. This was rather typical of them both and it is perhaps this particular quality in Melbourne that he admired. But I think it was not so much that he admired Melbourne, he liked the way it was written, he liked the style of the writing and he was interested in the period. I think these were all elements which gave him great pleasure rather than the fact that he was a particular admirer of a certain character which I am sure he wasn't. Well perhaps that is a slight exaggeration but he certainly never talked about Melbourne as being one of the great figures of the 19th century.

[-40-]

NEUSTADT: Yes. It is a footnote and I wanted to get it in. I have too seen these rather plausible things.

When did he and Macmillan meet next?

HARLECH: They next met here in Washington in April of 1962. The Prime Minister came over for a big speech up in New York and then came down and stayed at the Embassy here and he had further talks in the White House. They were a little bit more formal. I know President Kennedy felt that if we had other talks at the White House he would have tried to arrange them in his own office rather than in the Cabinet Room. In the Cabinet Room we got stuck on either side of the table and it tended to take the form of a presentation by somebody from one side and then a rebuttal from the other. The exchanges were rather more formal. Nevertheless, there were times for private talks and on the Sunday, before he left to go home, we all had lunch in the White House, just the Prime Minister, my wife and I, the President and Mrs. Kennedy. That was an exceptionally enjoyable lunch because we discussed everything in the world; what we thought of each other's politicians, which books we were reading, the President I think had just finished *The Guns of August* [by Barbara W. Tuchman], about the first month's campaign of the 1914 war and had been impressed by it. He gave Macmillan, who hadn't read it, a copy. It was a very informal lunch and really set the seal on their friendship and talking to both of them afterwards, both the President and Macmillan—felt that this had developed between them. The kind of discussions that they were able to have together round that table were really typical of the kind of discussions they had in their own homes with their best friends. This really put the seal on it.

NEUSTADT: They both felt...

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: What impressed Kennedy about *The Guns of August*?

HARLECH: I think it was just that he was fascinated at the detailed discussion of the strategies and so on. What he was particularly concerned to try and get out of Harold Macmillan some opinions but as he hadn't read it yet, it mostly devolved on me to try and explain what we thought of some of the major characters involved. But in *The Guns of August*, it is made out that General Sir Henry Wilson [Sir Henry Hughes Wilson] is rather an admirable figure because he was in favor of conforming with the movements of the French armies whereas General French [Sir John Denton Pinkstone French, Earl of Ypres], who was the commander in the field was rather to blame for being against this. I said that I thought this was rather unfair to French. I don't think French was a very great general but in view of what happened in 1940, his inclinations to withdraw the British expeditionary force towards the Channel ports which were his sources of supply rather than conform to the French movement which was falling back on Paris, was not altogether unreasonable. That is to say most of the reports he got from either flank were that the French were in total retreat. That he had no hope of holding the Germans with his four or five divisions and that his left flank was completely open, the Belgians having collapsed and there was every reason to suppose that the Germans would be able to take the northern ports and then he would be cut off from his supplies. Well in fact the French did stand firm, in fact

the Germans did outrun their supplies, they became too exhausted and they were thrown back but in view of what happened in 1940 where the circumstances were really rather similar, any British general who

[-42-]

had taken the whole of what then existed of the British army back to defend Paris and hadn't come out at Dunkirk would have gone down in history as a blithering idiot. So I think if you look at the evidence, it was rather unfair to French and I explained this all to President Kennedy and this is exactly the kind of thing that always fascinated him. He loved talking about the battles of the Civil War as you know. Whether it was right for Pickett [George Edward Pickett] to order that charge when he went and looked at that ridge and how it was real suicide, impossible and that really he ought to be court-martialed and so on. On the other hand if this is your last moment to win a decisive victory and you know that if you don't win then all is lost almost anything is allowable. These kind of moments in history when individual people had to take a very difficult judgment always fascinated him.

NEUSTADT: It goes way back doesn't it? This is a digression but it doesn't matter. When you knew him before the war did that kind of fascination exist?

HARLECH: I didn't know him well enough then and of course I was I suppose 20 and he was 21. We talked a good deal more about golf or what parties we were going to rather than getting into the sort of discussions of this kind. There was evidence of it from his acute interest in what was happening in European politics at that time. That he was doing this thesis to produce his book indicated really that he was thinking more deeply on these things than I knew at that time. I didn't know him particularly well.

NEUSTADT: I suppose the war must have been the deepening thing.

HARLECH: Yes, in the death of his elder brother [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], and the feeling that he had the family responsibility of making a

[-43-]

contribution to public life which I think grew steadily after the war. When he first came over after the war it was already evident that what he liked discussing were world problems. That is to say, I remember him coming to lunch with us in London, it must have been in '47 or '48—I think Bobby Kennedy had been over in Palestine looking at the situation there and the whole of lunch we did nothing except discuss the Palestine situation and what might be done about it and whether Balfour [Arthur James Balfour] had been right to make his declaration in 1917 offering a home for the Jews in Palestine and so on. It was immediately apparent on that occasion when he came to London, that his mind was turning very much towards world affairs and political problems.

NEUSTADT: Where did that extraordinary interest in other people's politics come from?

HARLECH: I don't know where it comes from—it's perhaps to some extent it came from being abroad at rather a formative period of his life—first of all in London and then out in the Pacific and trying to understand what it was the United States was fighting for, how they got into the war, what ought to be done to make the peace at the end of the war, what ought to be done to make the peace at the end of the war. I think for any intelligent young man living through the period '38–'45, when they were between the ages of 20 and 25, unless you were moronic on the subject of politics, inevitably your mind turned to thinking of what ought to be done about this world—obviously not blaming them—but clearly our elders and betters had not made a great success of conducting the affairs of the world. You had a strong feeling that somehow, after 1945, an effort must be made to see that human affairs were conducted in a more responsible and sensible way than they had in the past and that you couldn't afford another world war with nuclear weapons around.

NEUSTADT: No one could have had that kind of appreciation without having along with it this enormous curiosity about other political animals and what their zoos were like. What were the ground rules in your world. I was always terribly impressed with this.

HARLECH: Yes it was terribly impressive and it grew and grew. He had a phenomenal knowledge of what were the political pressures in individual countries overseas. It was another, of course, example of his ability to make excuses for people who were conducting policies which he thought were wrong or inimicable to American interests; whether it was Nehru's [Jawaharlal Nehru] position over Goa, the invasion of Goa—although he disapproved, he was prepared to make excuses and try and understand why a person who had always been lecturing him about peaceful action and had been against taking strong military action should find himself invading a pathetic little bit of territory like Goa. I am not sure that he didn't get some sort of satisfaction out of the fact. After all his preaching Nehru seemed to be the only person in the world at that particular moment who was committing aggression.

NEUSTADT: Well he tried quite hard to stop it I gather.

HARLECH: Yes but he didn't take too dramatic a view of the whole situation. I remember at that moment this was just before the Bermuda Conference again people in England were very upset, both about the threat to Goa and the Indonesian threat to West Irian and I remember President Kennedy saying to me, "Well, of course, I thoroughly disapprove and as you know we're doing everything to stop aggressive acts in both these cases; but let's face it, if at the end of the day Goa becomes Indian and West Irian becomes Indonesia, neither you in Britain nor we in America are going to suffer any irrevocable damage. We

must keep a sense of perspective about this however much one disapproves of the action. These aren't great issues and even if we can't produce results let's not feel that the whole world is crumbling around us because we can't bring our influence to bear on these kind of issues."

NEUSTADT: But Sukarno [Achmed Sukarno] did have a rather different bite for you.

HARLECH: Sukarno?

NEUSTADT: Yes.... West Irian.

HARLECH: Certainly, although I think the evidence of Sukarno's ill-will towards us grew steadily after he had got West Irian under his power. We were taking a slightly more relaxed view of Indonesian policies before that.

NEUSTADT: Well that shade of divergence between us comes at the end of the story doesn't it.

When did the British Guiana thing begin to become a difficulty for us?

HARLECH: Well...it had been rumbling along. I think it got worse certainly in '62. We were very worried about it and I think the United States Administration had become more worried about British Guiana by the summer of '62. They foresaw the possibility of us giving independence to British Guiana with Dr. Jagan [Cheddi Jagan] as Prime Minister. They felt that it would be almost impossible for the United States to give any great economic help to British Guiana under these circumstances and therefore he would almost certainly go and get help from the Communists and his wife [Janet Jagan] even more so. This was deeply disturbing to the United States which was already struggling with the problem of subversion being exported by Cuba and to have a territory, however small and insignificant, on the actual mainland of South America from which further subversion

could be exported into the continent—this was something which they became more and more concerned about. I would say from about the summer of '62 was when the President began to make it very clear to the British government that the granting of independence to British Guiana in circumstances where it could become a hotbed of Communism, was something that was really unacceptable to the United States.

NEUSTADT: What did he propose to do for you in return for your...

HARLECH: Well, if we could so arrange things that independence was given to a moderate government, the United States made it very clear that they would

do everything to assist that government with economic aid and so on to build it up. The hope would then be that the people of the country would see that it was in their interest to support a moderate government rather than an extremist one. This was really the maximum extent to which the United States could help.

NEUSTADT: Well that story just sort of potters on. It is still going on.

HARLECH: Exactly. In fact by the time President Kennedy was assassinated we hadn't found a solution to it but the problem was still in cold storage as it were. We weren't granting independence—we had thought out a new constitution which we hoped would encourage more moderate leaders in the country to come forward and that is where it stood at that particular period....

NEUSTADT: Did Macmillan and the President meet between April and Nassau?

HARLECH: April...

NEUSTADT: ...'62...

HARLECH: Let me think—we are now thinking of 1962. No

[-47-]

I don't think so. No the President, of course, was more or less stuck here because he had the midterm elections in the autumn of '62 and we didn't have a meeting again until Nassau in 1962.

NEUSTADT: What began to happen.... Here there was this real cementing of a relationship by April and you and I don't have to go into what happened up to Nassau...

HARLECH: ...Skybolt episode, yes.

NEUSTADT: What began to happen by way of use of informal messages, telephone—what were the customs?

HARLECH: Quite a number of messages used to be exchanged—letters from one to the other discussing the situation, East-West relations, what we might do about Berlin and on all types of matter; at certain moments the Prime Minister was very concerned about the problem of international liquidity and what was going to happen to world trade unless we got a little bit further away from the remnants of the Gold Standard and so on. He would exchange views on all these kind of things, very often in personal messages. For more immediate messages more use was made of an automatic teleprinter which could work between McBundy's [McGeorge Bundy] office and the Private Secretary's office in Admiralty House or 10 Downing Street. The number of times they

talked on the telephone was very much exaggerated. Except at moments of considerable crisis, they did not talk on the telephone. And I don't think, looking back on it, except when very quick decisions required to be taken, that either of them found it a very satisfactory method of communication. Of course, during the Cuba crisis week during the autumn of '62, they did talk many times on the telephone. When I say many times, perhaps four times during the week. I've got the record somewhere. This was, of course, valuable in a situation which was changing hourly

[-48-]

but at other times they really kept away from the telephone.

NEUSTADT: Well this was certainly what happened after October as the Skybolt situation gathered.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: I had the feeling, I'd like to check with you, that the Prime Minister didn't like that instrument—it wasn't natural.

HARLECH: It was partly that. Exactly, he was never very at home on the telephone—but also the language you use on the telephone is really rather too imprecise when matters of great importance are under discussion because you then remember a phrase which may not have been very carefully thought out—perhaps syntax even not very good and on that basis perhaps important decisions have to be taken. It is really better to have time to collect your thoughts and send a telegram which you have read through very carefully before it goes, which uses very precise phraseology; then allow that to be the basis on which decisions are taken. I think that they both felt this. It was certainly quite useful if you first sent a telegram and then just rang up to say can you agree with my paragraph three, or have you any modifications. Now that kind of a conversation was perfectly useful but just a general discussion about a situation usually left a lot of loose ends which then had to be tied up in either teleprinter exchanges or telegrams later on.

NEUSTADT: When they talked in October on the Cuban crisis what sorts of things did they feel they had to talk about?

HARLECH: It was usually an assessment of the position. If the United States actually had to fire at a Russian merchant ship what might the Soviet reaction be. That is to say to what extent was there a danger that if the United States were

[-49-]

forced to take military action against Cuba the Soviets could retaliate by putting the squeeze on Berlin. It was these sort of calculations that mainly concerned them and whether the

actions that were being taken by the United States were calculated to make the Russians withdraw and yet were not so belligerent that it made it almost impossible for Khrushchev to climb down. They got on to discussing the possibility of considering whether some agreement might be made on the missiles that we had in Turkey and Italy—whether there was value in suggesting to Khrushchev that if he would pull his missiles out of Cuba the United States, which was anyway going to do so and had already planned to do so, would take its missiles out of Italy and Turkey. Now this wasn't really a discussion which was in anyway appeasement—it was trying to find a way in which the United States got what it wanted and somehow saved Khrushchev's face. In fact they decided against offering this particular deal but these kind of tactics were quite rightly discussed to see what were the merits and the demerits of such a proposal.

NEUSTADT: Now was the primary initiative the President's or Macmillan's?

HARLECH: The first conversation, the initiative was the President's. He said he would call Macmillan and after the conversations I had had with him on the Sunday I'd sent a very full telegram to London about our discussion so that the Prime Minister knew what was under debate and that was the first of the talks. And then I think it was 50-50 on later occasions when the Prime Minister felt that he would like to say something to the President.

NEUSTADT: This is the first side of the third tape of an interview by Richard Neustadt with the British

Ambassador, Lord Harlech, for the Kennedy Library.

Just at the end of the tape Ambassador we were talking about the telephone contacts between President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan during the Cuban crisis and the reason for my question is essentially this. I am very much interested in the degree to which Kennedy initiated those phone calls, in the sense that he thought of Macmillan as another source of advice. I take it there was some of this?

HARLECH: Certainly there was. Frequently at the end of the telephone call the President would say, "Right Prime Minister and I'll give you another telephone call tomorrow night and we'll discuss the situation again then." That is to say that they were not telephone calls with Macmillan sitting in London, getting in a state about the situation and wishing to try and impose some kind of a policy on the President. It was very much an exchange of views and as you say, I would say that the initiative came about equally from each side.

NEUSTADT: Now we don't need to go into the entanglement over Skybolt that followed because we have been through that together in other ways, or Nassau as such and the rest of the period in which they were both in office together really falls into the frame of Kennedy's problem with Europe. There was no problem with the

English as such—and it was a mutual problem. Perhaps we should turn off to the question of European policy as Kennedy attempted to pursue it. In my understanding of the situation, by the time that Kennedy came into office in ’61 the Prime Minister had privately decided that Britain would have to make a move toward the Common Market, and this private decision became a public decision by the summer of ’61.

HARLECH: Exactly—in July of ’61.

[-51-]

NEUSTADT: And this, of course, was something that all Kennedy’s advisers favored very much. Do you know how much he had formulated views on the desirability of Britain’s joining the Market before he took over?

HARLECH: No. I don’t know that. Certainly all my contacts with him during the period indicated that he was a great enthusiast for Britain being a member of the Common Market—and this for a wide range of reasons. Rather naturally the United States didn’t have to go into the question of what advantages it would have for us economically and so on—that was a problem of our own. But they saw a tremendous political advantage in it and I particularly recall the occasion when Hugh Gaitskell was over here as leader of the opposition. The President had arranged a lunch party for him at which he got not only all the senior members of the Administration like Dean Rusk, George Ball, Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg], who was then Secretary of Labor but also people from Congress like Senator Fulbright [J. William Fulbright]. At the end of the lunch he went round the whole of the table and asked for the views of all these Americans on the question of whether Britain should go into Europe and all with one accord said they wanted us in, very largely for reasons which they could not make public—namely that they were nervous about the direction that Europe might take if the two most powerful nations in that set-up were Germany and France. Whatever France might think of its role and its ability to lead that particular group, the judgment was that in the long run Germany would certainly be the most powerful nation in the group and nobody round that table was enthusiastic about a Europe as strong as that led by Germany. They hoped very much that we would be in because we would add some political

[-52-]

ballast which they thought would be in the interest of the United States and indeed in the interests of the Atlantic Community. This was the story they told and I am afraid that it didn’t make a tremendous impression on Hugh Gaitskell but then he had internal problems in his Party which made it difficult for him. But on that occasion it was very clear how strongly the President felt that we had a role to play in Europe and indeed that Europe might well run off the rails if we were not involved.

NEUSTADT: It was not a matter of how nice it would be to have another federation for the sake of federations.

HARLECH: No.

NEUSTADT: None of that sort of thing.

HARLECH: He was the last person in the world...

NEUSTADT: Right.

HARLECH: ...to think that you could just translate American experience to Europe and say because the States joined together in a federation it would be quite easy for Europe. He had knowledge of enough European history to realize that they were up against very different problems.

NEUSTADT: Now while those negotiations were proceeding in all major respects I take it there was an identity of views between our two governments. At the same time, Kennedy was confronted by a host of counsels on the problem of the handling of the strategic deterrent and its sharing Europe. And a number of these centered on the question of the French nuclear program to what could be done with de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle]. It is the spring of 1962 as I recall that the Berlin crisis had sort of been shelved by that point. There were two bouts in the American government of discussion whether or not...

HARLECH: ...to make some offer to the French.

NEUSTADT: Yes and on both occasions he finally decided against it. Did he talk to you about this?

HARLECH: Yes he did indeed. I think he could see the arguments for making this gesture—there was the possibility that if the French were offered the same king of terms as the British they might be more cooperative in NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], more anxious to align their policies to the United States and so on—and the dangers of a refusal to make such an offer. On the other hand, he really became I think completely convinced, and this is what he told me, that if you made this offer, de Gaulle would snap it up, use the information that the United States gave him but use it in a way to make France more independent and not more cooperative. That is to say that one of the ideas that de Gaulle had very much in his mind was that French influence would never be really great until she had an independent nuclear potential of her own. Anything that the Americans did to advance the day when she had that potential would also advance the day when de Gaulle pursued more anti-American policies. I am using rather a short hand saying anti-American, they are not deliberately anti-American but the effect would be anti-American. Kennedy was never convinced that an offer to the French of this kind would persuade de Gaulle to be more cooperative in the alliance. On the other hand, there were

certain things which, in the short term, were of particular interest to the United States and certain conditions under which he thought it was reasonable to make the offer. Now whether the conditions which would be attached to the offer would ever be acceptable to de Gaulle is a different matter. But there were two things. First of all, there was the Test Ban Treaty, at those

[-54-]

moments when it looked possible that we were going to get a Test Ban Treaty, and our hopes varied from time to time, he did say that in certain circumstances if what was required in order to get the French to sign a Test Ban Treaty—and this particularly applied to a comprehensive one—he would not think it unreasonable for the Americans to offer the French some measure of cooperation in the nuclear field so that it would be possible for the French to have a capability without continuing testing. He thought that was worth considering. He didn't say, "I definitely will give this information," but he thought that these were the kind of circumstances in which an offer of that kind might be worthwhile. It wouldn't be worthwhile simply in order to try and sweeten de Gaulle generally but if it were to achieve a specific purpose then it might be worth it. That was one condition. The other was, of course, after Nassau. Having made these offers to the British to provide the Polaris missile [Lockheed UGM-27 Polaris nuclear-armed submarine-launched ballistic missile] and having offered exactly the same proposition to the French, of course there was this difference between us, that while we were capable of making our own nuclear warhead, the French were not at that time. Therefore although the offer looked equal on the surface, in practice it was not an equal offer and he felt that if the French came back and said, "Well of course we have difficulties about the warhead," he would be prepared to enter into discussions about this. Again he didn't commit himself to saying we will give them the necessary information, but if, as a result of those discussions, it looked as though the French might be prepared to enter into this kind of arrangement by which NATO had a pooling of its nuclear forces, the British committing some, the French committing some and the Americans committing some,

[-55-]

then this would be a great advance in French policy and would get us over all the problem of the French feeling hurt that they didn't have the same potential as the British, and didn't have the same relationship with the Americans as the British. All this might make it worth having some deep discussions to see what the French would be prepared to agree to if the Americans were prepared to help them with the warheads for the Polaris missiles. So he didn't take an absolutely rigid view about this but he did not agree with those advisors who recommended to him that the way to improve relations with France was to make an unconditional offer of nuclear assistance to the French.

NEUSTADT: Now the French or de Gaulle on January 14th not only promised veto of your entry into the EEC [European Economic Community] but rejected negotiation on the Nassau offer and left us at once with both prospects gone. The President, as I understand it, did not cease to hope for some time that something

could be made of the pooling as you call it, I think we came to call it INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] of multinational forces and then a multilateral contribution by the other powers. Something like that.

HARLECH: Exactly.

NEUSTADT: He didn't give it up any sooner than he could help. He finally gave it up when it became clear that the French were not going to revive these negotiations and when the British couldn't see their way to the kind of commitment of the V bombers that Norstad [Lauris Norstad] or Stikker [Dirk U. Stikker] would have accepted. It must have happened in January or February.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: Do you recall that period?

HARLECH: I do. I don't think it was so much that he didn't feel that our commitment of V bombers to NATO

[-56-]

wouldn't go far enough. I don't think it was that. I think the real problem which had arisen was over Germany. Not only had, as you say, France excluded us from the Common Market, not only had she turned down the Polaris offer which would have meant that she did cooperate to some extent with the rest of the Western Alliances in nuclear matters but she also pushed ahead with the signing of the Franco-Germany Treaty. Now I think there was a real fear in the President's mind in February and March of '63, with Dr. Adenauer still in power in Germany, that Europe would move away from its commitment to the Atlantic Alliance. That being fed with stories from de Gaulle about the perfidy of both the British and the Americans, the Germans might throw in their lot with the French and might even reach some understanding by which perhaps the French made the nuclear warheads but in the whole field of nuclear weaponry, that is to say delivery systems and so on and the technical backing up and the research that was required, the Germans would help the French and create what they would call some kind of a European nuclear force. This was a real fear in their minds. Therefore the mixed man force which would tie the Germans in on an Atlantic basis became a much more desirable objective after the Franco-German Treaty than it had been directly after Nassau. You know I don't think President Kennedy was enormously enthusiastic about the mixed-man force at the time of Nassau and he certainly understood Harold Macmillan's political difficulties with this and the necessity for Macmillan to go back from Nassau and say that he still had an independent nuclear deterrent. Although we talked about interdependence and there was the idea of setting up a multilateral force and possibly coming along, a mixed-manned

[-57-]

force, he understood that the political pressures at home required Macmillan to lay a greater stress on the independent side of it and less stress on the interdependent side. The converse of this was that the President made it perfectly clear both to Harold Macmillan and to me subsequently that for his part, he of course would stress the interdependent side of it. Gradually he became more convinced that part of the mixture would have to be a mixed-manned force and although he wasn't a great enthusiast for it, he saw that for political reasons the United States would have to commit themselves to the Germans and anybody else who was prepared to participate. Then he had the business of trying to persuade us that this was an important element in the picture and, as you know, during the early period we wanted to stress the international nuclear force to a greater extent, whereas there were certain people in the Administration here who were saying that that was not really important; the really important thing was the mixed-manned force as it subsequently became known.

NEUSTADT: My impression is that he never did really want to take the mixed-manned force as the route, but he blew hot and cold?

HARLECH: He to some extent blew hot and cold, although by the spring of that year, I think he was convinced that there seemed to be no alternative plan which was really acceptable to the Germans and would solve the problem of the German participation in the nuclear field.

NEUSTADT: Well this was after Tyler [William R. Tyler, Jr.] had come back and Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer] had said yes he did want it.

HARLECH: He did want it yes. I think that's true. Again he would say to me, "Well, I'm not mad about the surface fleet

in some ways I would have thought that submarines would have been better but then Mountbatten's [Lord Louis Mountbatten] been over here and said that nothing would ever induce him to get into a submarine which was mixed-manned and you've said that submarines are totally out so that's out—so far as I know there are no other suggestions of how a mixed-manned force should be built up," and he had, I think, become totally convinced that something of this kind was necessary. He was never wholly satisfied that the surface fleet was necessarily the best way of solving the problem. I think he would have been quite happy if our people had come along with an effective alternative scheme at that stage which would also have been mixed-manned. He would have given a very long serious look at it. But in the absence of an alternative scheme he went along with the mixed-manned surface fleet.

NEUSTADT: Well then of course the Germans said "yes" and then the Italian election came along and finally the shrinkage of Christian Democratic strength that put them out of play for a while. Then Macmillan got completely immersed in the Profumo affair which put you out of play for a while. And then the President

went off on his European trip. My impression is that his experience in Germany was a very real experience.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: Did he talk to you about that?

HARLECH: Yes, he did indeed. I saw him of course at Birch Grove when he met the Prime Minister. It was agreed that it would be unreasonable to press the U.K. for a decision on the mixed-manned force until after our election or at least until some later date, and that was, I think, quite clearly understood. But he talked about Germany at that time

[-59-]

and then I had a long talk with him when he showed me the films of his German trip up at Hyannis Port in July of ’63. He had been immensely moved by the reception he had had there. It had obviously had a profound effect on him but he also had been quite disturbed by it. I remember him telling me that at that great meeting in Berlin when he got that almost hysterical reception, what worried him was that he felt that if when he came to his peroration he had said, “And at this moment I call upon you all to cross into East Germany and pull down that wall,” they’d all have gone. This he found disturbing about the German reactions. Therefore though it was a tremendous boost to his morale to find that they regarded him as the leader of the West and were going to give him all their backing, it also gave him an opportunity to see, which he had already well understood, the German people as such at this moment in history were not totally to be relied upon and that this rather sheep-like instinct of theirs could be very frightening under certain circumstances and under the wrong leader still.

NEUSTADT: ...and educative. It is very interesting that he got it all. Well he would.

HARLECH: I am not sure that he ever really liked hysteria. No, he was somebody who didn’t like the display of undue emotion and although when you are a political leader the warmth of your reception is something which obviously adds to your political prestige, and your power and is therefore something which is very gratifying; nevertheless, his own character told him that people who become hysterical and get overexcited do not usually have good judgment. It is not actually an emotion for which he had any great admiration.

NEUSTADT: That’s something we must come back to

[-60-]

when I ask you to talk about him as a person. There is a lot of loose talk about the Kennedy dispassion and I want to get it as clear as possible. But to finish out this line—he had had apparently from the Berlin crisis on a number of notions

about Germany in the context of East-West relations. It must have involved some notions about the price—the bargain over Germany with the Soviet Union if there ever came time to make a bargain. Is there anything you can or would wish to add to the record on that?

HARLECH: He became very exasperated of course with the Germans. This feeling he had that they were quite prepared to allow the West to get into a serious crisis with the Soviet Union over Berlin, that they had no ideas of how some solution might be found but were always calling upon the United States to maintain their tough attitude towards the Soviet Union. On several occasions over the 2 ½ years, he did say to me that he thought that it would be a good thing to try and get the Germans directly into contact with the Russians. This was one of the ways he thought of forcing the Germans to come up with some sort of ideas of how they might do a deal with the Russians which would prevent us all being brought to the brink of a crisis about once every two years. He never got very much response from the Germans on this. He was acutely conscious of really the absurd situation we had all got ourselves into over Berlin—and I am now going back to the directly post-War period. The military situation with which we were faced was an impossible one from the West's point of view. That is to say, it was indefensible West Berlin with conventional forces, yet it was almost unthinkable that you should start the global nuclear war over West Berlin. How could you therefore persuade the Soviet Union to keep their hands off this thing when the price of retaliations to a

Russian move might be a global nuclear war. I can't say that he himself reached a satisfactory solution to the problem but it did irritate him quite dreadfully when either the Germans or the French were demanding that he should stand firm and take up a tough line but had no ideas of their own as to how this particular problem might be solved or at least put into cold storage for a period—until perhaps such a time as the whole world atmosphere changed because he always believed that was possible. Stave it off for ten years. Then the Soviet society might well look very different from what it does now. This would be worth doing. I think the French irritated him even more because whereas they were always encouraging everybody to take a tough line he knew perfectly well that if it came to a showdown they would be the first to run up the white flag. And indeed they had made this very clear. I suspect Harold Macmillan had told him of the conversations he'd had with the French at an earlier period on this particular issue. The French had again been taking this line that we mustn't negotiate with the Russians, that we must just stand firm and that everyone ought to back up a tough line over West Berlin. He had been over in Paris talking to de Gaulle and his advisers and he had said, "Right, well perhaps that is the right policy but then of course we must be able to convince the Russians that we really mean business so we have now been working on plans for mobilization. At what stage do you think we ought to go for the mobilization of all our military forces?" Whereupon the French said, "Oh, there can't be any question of mobilization that would be much too drastic a measure, we couldn't possibly order a mobilization it would cause panic in the country." The Prime Minister then

pressed home his point and said, “What are you doing about evacuating all the women and children because this might impress the Russians?” “Oh, we couldn’t mention evacuating the women...” and they all went white in the face. No mobilization, no evacuation of women and children from dangerous areas. So Macmillan said, “Well if you are not prepared to do either of those two things, how are you going to convince the Russians that you really mean business?” There would be nothing worse in the world than to get the United States into a position where they talk tough and it turns out to be a bluff. This was the kind of attitude that President Kennedy also adapted to this tough talk he was always hearing from the French. He knew that they weren’t really prepared to back it up.

NEUSTADT: He knew also didn’t he, that the Germans weren’t either?

HARLECH: That’s true. We all had any amount of evidence that the Germans didn’t care so much about West Berlin, that they thought that the whole of Germany ought to be destroyed in order to defend it, which is what it in fact required.

NEUSTADT: I have just one more question, and then I’ll let you go as this has been a long session for you.

You talked yesterday a bit about Kennedy’s very special quality of being able to see two sides always—even if he’d taken one of them he could always see the other. Now in the evolution of his European policy after January 14th of 1963, particularly on MLF [Multilateral Force] seems to be that he paid an administrative price for this quality—I may overdo this but that very ability to see the pros and cons of things like the multilateral force meant that at moments he was encouraging particular people in his government to go very far and pull

him along with them. I’ve never known how conscious he was of this, and I never had a chance to find out and I wondered if you’d gotten any sense of...?

HARLECH: Well, I’m trying to think of this particular issue—of course it is quite true that there were those who were passionately in favor of the multilateral force and no doubt felt that he had rather let them down on that score in not fighting harder for it.

NEUSTADT: The incident that I remember best is the Merchant mission, February, which was instructed not to commit him and then proceeded to assemble a team of 18 to take a special plane to all the capitals of Europe which in itself was bound to be...

HARLECH: ...a commitment. Well I think this was a particular issue in which really his mind slowly evolved. I suspect that he would have wished that he

hadn't been committed so far—that is to say that he could have retained a greater amount of room to maneuver. But then of course I think he also had an instinctive judgment that there was something to be said for getting rather far committed in this—that is to say although perhaps he hadn't rationally worked out where it would end he had a feeling that it was right to go pretty far down this road. Therefore I don't think it was really a case of him being committed so far in principle that it would embarrass him. He was quite prepared—and would have been tough over it, to change the particulars if it had been necessary but I think quite early on he thought that there was no harm in being committed in principle. If the time came when adjustments had to be made he could arrange that—he could fix that.

[-64-]

NEUSTADT: It explains a lot.

HARLECH: But I don't know how as the chief executive in any government you can really be assured that people at all levels, conducting affairs over a vast area are going to explain the policy exactly as you would want it. This is a council of perfection and he could never have hoped for it. Therefore there are moments when perhaps people working for you are going around saying that they know what the President thinks—this is his policy—when in fact he has not given it his full approval, at least not in those precise terms.

NEUSTADT: This is the second side of the third tape—interview by Richard Neustadt with the British Ambassador for the John F. Kennedy Library.

Ambassador, one of the things which fascinates me is what lay behind President Kennedy's own sense of confidence about being President—doing what he had to do—his personal confidence—whether it grew or changed or always remained the same and what it came from.

HARLECH: Well it was very much a family characteristic. I think this applies to practically all the Kennedys. They have a feeling that when they take on a job that perhaps they aren't the greatest expert in the world on that particular job, nevertheless they feel they have a contribution to make and they have all had this curious confidence in their judgment. Now perhaps he had it in an exceptional degree. I don't think I noticed very much change in this confidence and certainly I didn't myself detect a lack of confidence after a disaster like the Bay of Pigs. I didn't see him immediately afterwards, I don't know, obviously he

[-65-]

worried about how mistakes were made. But I didn't detect that this made him more reluctant to take decisions. I think that that criticism was sometimes made, but I never noticed it myself. I think, you know, with all human beings one of the things that gives you confidence is to have been in extreme peril and come well out of it. Perhaps on some occasions to have

been near death and come back from the brink. I have always noticed that people who have had that kind of experience have a sort of calm, not quite detachment to life, but a calm attitude to anything that life can throw at them which is rather significant. Of course he had had this experience, it does increase your confidence. You know that life is uncertain, that you do your best, maybe you are cut down in the middle of your life and you don't achieve all that you had hoped to do, but somehow you come to terms with life and this gives you a sort of inner confidence, which he certainly displayed.

NEUSTADT: His humor sounds to be a key to that concern consistent with death.

HARLECH: Yes, he had a very good sense of humor—a wonderful sense of humor. Even under the worst conditions he always had a little phrase which relaxed the tension—everybody smiled and so on.

NEUSTADT: Well he also scoffed at himself—well scoffing is not the right word—I wish I knew what the right word was—he was wry about life.

HARLECH: Yes, well he had a considerable humility—

that is to say that he could see why people would criticize him and he understood it perfectly well. Like everybody else he didn't care much for criticism, and only when he thought it grossly unfair, and usually when it was criticism addressed to somebody close to him, rather than to him personally, did he get really angry.

NEUSTADT: Did you sense a distinction between his sensitivity to criticism as a professionally bad thing and his sensitivity to criticism which was more personally directed? I used to feel that he got angry half the time because it wasn't good for a man in political office to have a certain kind of criticism. But sometimes he felt it personally, there was some kind of difference. I've never been clear on what the difference was.

HARLECH: No. I don't know that I noticed that very much. I would have said that he didn't care too much about professional criticism—he may have objected to it—thought that it was very bad politically or something of this kind—but this he shrugged off extremely well. It was personal criticism and in particular criticism of his friends or relations which he thought was unfair, that used to make him very angry indeed. He was very sensitive to that.

NEUSTADT: How do you think he felt he was doing?—looked at himself?

HARLECH: I think he felt he was doing a fine job and had a great deal more to give. I mean he was feeling his way in. I think he grew in confidence to this

extent that he knew after three years that he could manage a team, could run an Administration and that it was running more smoothly, it was a better oiled machine after three years than it had been at the beginning. Indeed it improved the whole time. Of course

[-67-]

the Cuban crisis was a very good test for it and it came out with flying colors. This reassured him that he could run a fine working Administration. Politically he was extremely confident that he would win in 1964 and was full of ideas of what he could do in his second term.

NEUSTADT: Was he talking about them or was he just sort of putting them off to open after Christmas?

HARLECH: No, I don't think he was putting them off. They were things like the development of his policy for improving relations between East and West—possible improvements in the West Alliance following up his Philadelphia speech. He obviously was anxious to get into this whole area of international liquidity—how the West should run its financial affairs for which there wasn't really time in his first term but which he could see were important issues for the West. This was an area in which he would be able to make a contribution in his second term.

NEUSTADT: How about the domestic side. Which never held him, I guess, to quite the same degree?

HARLECH: It did in a way. Of course, as you know, he was keen on some kind of a poverty program—he was very keen on his Medicare proposals—he was having a tough time with Congress over them—he felt that even if he couldn't get them in his first term he had no doubt whatever that he'd be able to get them in his second term. I think it was, in fact, the conduct of the economy which after all is the key thing as to whether the country is going to be prosperous or not and this he cared about and took a greater interest in.

NEUSTADT: How did he think the Civil Rights thing was going to go?

[-68-]

HARLECH: Well I think he hoped to get his bill through—the bill which did finally pass but, of course, like all intelligent people he didn't believe that that necessarily cured the problem. But it was the least that could be done for the Negro problem at the present time and he, therefore, believed in it very strongly. He was so pragmatic in his approach to things that he recognized as well as anybody that if you have been brought up in an atmosphere, the kind of atmosphere that you have in Mississippi or Alabama it's going to take years to overcome your problems and it's certainly not just going to be done by legislation, although legislation was a part of the whole scheme.

NEUSTADT: Was he fretting about the slowness in Congress in his last year?

HARLECH: Very much so. I remember him telling me how people complained that Congress hadn't got through enough and that he hadn't got through enough real legislation. He said if you look back over the record of Congress in this century, any President actually trying to do something is almost always baulked by the Congress unless the country is really frightened like at the beginning of a war or the depth of the slump when Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] first came in when you can get them to move. But you look at Roosevelt's record in his subsequent terms. He found it really tough going getting his program through Congress and Kennedy felt judged by those standards, what he got through Congress really was pretty good. Judged by ideal standards it was perhaps not good but then the Constitution was such and the working of Congress and the way that the important committees were chaired by extremely conservative old congressmen, all this made the machinery very hard to work. It was easy to say it was all right for President Eisenhower. He didn't want to pass

legislation. If you wanted to pass legislation you were always going to have trouble.

NEUSTADT: Well I think that's perfectly sound. There is always now going to be the issue for the historians, since so much of Kennedy's program came to fruition in Johnson's [Lyndon B. Johnson] first session. Johnson exploited magnificently the opportunity which the transition gave him. There is currently all this talk of contrast between...

HARLECH: But you know I think Kennedy would have got both these pieces of legislation through.

NEUSTADT: ...this is an election year.

HARLECH: Tougher I admit, but he'd have got them through. I think we sometimes forget what a remarkable piece of legislation the Trade Expansion Bill was. Because this looked when it was first introduced as though it was just the kind of thing that Congress killed stone dead. It was an extremely liberal bill; went far beyond anything that had been given to Presidents in the past—the power to negotiate major reductions in trade barriers throughout the world and he got that through.

NEUSTADT: Yes. We would have got these through. Dirksen [Everett M. Dirksen], whose performance was keyed on Civil Rights, would have been under exactly the same pressures. But I gather he had been working on this relationship for quite a long while.

HARLECH: Yes—he always felt Dirksen was an ally when he needed him.

NEUSTADT: Yes. He, as a human being, introduced a certain gaiety into this town. I don't think it has ever had before and—a court-life if you will, of a rather different character than we've seen at least going back to Teddy Roosevelt [Theodore Roosevelt] I think and you saw a great deal of that. How would

[-70-]

you characterize the court? Who were the courtiers?

HARLECH: It's a big subject.

NEUSTADT: Who had apartments at Versailles and who really had latch keys for weekends?

HARLECH: Well, it is a big subject and I, of course, can't make comparisons because I didn't know any previous presidency. He had his friends in a way split into compartments. There were those he greatly admired and were close friends without being very close friends. There were others who one wouldn't say he admired tremendously but were extremely close to him. That is to say he felt completely at ease with them and I think this is quite understandable—they were mostly schoolboy friendships which had matured over the years. There were people like Lem Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings] who did not participate much in political affairs, didn't share quite a lot of his interests, had quite a different type of mind yet nevertheless they'd shared the same room at school and this was a tremendously close relationship. I would say of all his men friends, Lem Billings was the one he felt most at ease with. There was Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr.], who also from an intellectual point of view, was not on his wavelength but who admired him tremendously—in both cases he knew that these people would go through fire and water for him and this, of course, quite naturally made him feel very close to them. But these were the kind of people he could relax with completely. Now there were others who were old friends, who perhaps he admired more but never shared quite that same intimacy. You saw it with the kind of people that he would take away for a completely family weekend. Really take into the sort of Kennedy Compound at Hyannis Port. They weren't very often the people who were publicly supposed to be close to him. I always

[-71-]

thought very much exaggerated was his friendship with Senator Smathers [George A. Smathers] for instance. I mean they had worked together in the Senate, they had certain interests in common—he found him quite an amusing companion but he never got on that kind of an inside position. Of course he liked being entertained—there were many acquaintanceships—some of them I think Jackie Kennedy's friends who he could relax with, he enjoyed being with them. Many of his semi-official friends, I suppose did not give him that relaxation and therefore he was not quite as open with them, not quite as relaxed with

them as he was with a group of friends, who as I say, really didn't share all his interests, really didn't participate in the main part of his life but were close human friends.

NEUSTADT: Who would you call the compounders?

HARLECH: Who had a bit of a foot in each camp?

NEUSTADT: Yes.

HARLECH: Well I would say people like Arthur Schlesinger, Joe Alsop and there were quite a number of others, Ben Smith [Benjamin A. Smith, II], Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee], Charlie Bartlett [Charles Bartlett]. Charlie Bartlett really almost belongs in the very inner group I would say, more than the others.

NEUSTADT: Well, I can see the utilities of both—Arthur seems to me a very interesting relationship because it was very intimate in some respects and not at all in others. He was a special kind of an amuser or entertainer. Then you get the interesting case of Ted Sorenson [Theodore C. Sorenson]—an intellectual intimacy—there was not an intimacy at all.

HARLECH: No—very very close, as you say, intellectually—both admired each other enormously—very happy spending the working day together but he didn't really get into the family circle.

NEUSTADT: How about Mac [McGeorge Bundy] as a special...?

HARLECH: Well. Of course, he came much later—he hadn't had that long apprenticeship before the presidency and had therefore never really got to know the President before he came to work in the White House. But they got on tremendously well. Obviously the President was very happy in his company but still somehow didn't wish to introduce him into that inner sanctum. Of course, I think if you are a family like the Kennedys who have been brought up all together you perhaps get your maximum enjoyment in the family circle—and let's face it, his greatest and closest friend and confidant was Bobby. Perhaps this is enough. Now there are the sort of personal friends of your brothers and sisters who almost become part of the family. That was really the sort of inner grouping, they shared the family's interests and were friends of other members of the family and not just of him. They made for a very relaxed and easy atmosphere in which they could all let their hair down and really say exactly what they liked and not have to consider the whole time, "Can I say this in front of this person?" When you are President it must be one of the terrible burdens that your every word is so important—is likely to be repeated by people and will spread just like dropping a pebble into a pool. This thought pressing in on him is probably one of the reasons why he took very few people into that very inner family circle where he really said exactly what he thought.

NEUSTADT: So that the people who got in were essentially people who had come in by natural osmosis over the years—over the pre-official...

HARLECH: Yes, exactly—pre-official. Other people got very close to him during the Administration. He got to like

[-73-]

Harriman more and more for instance. He became more and more intimate and they talked more and more freely. Certainly it was true of McBundy [McGeorge Bundy]—it was true to some extent of Bob McNamara but there were others who just somehow didn't fit in—Dean Rusk never got on to that kind of a relationship.

NEUSTADT: Part of this is a characteristic. I wish you could comment on it if you can. He had a particular kind of communication that was easy and natural to him—a sort of a shorthand and a very fast mind which took in shorthand—I had the feeling from outside that people who could not communicate in those terms—that was the first barrier.

HARLECH: That's absolutely true. I think that's a very shrewd comment—people even if they were brilliant and even if they had things he was very interested in, if before they came to the point they had to explain the whole buildup and background to what they had to say, these people in the end bored him. That is to say he expected them to recognize that most of what they had to say could be taken as read. They had better come to the point quickly and this was true both in work and in play, whether it was a serious conversation, a business conversation or whether it was ordinary private conversation.

NEUSTADT: Now did the family conversation proceed in this kind of shorthand?

HARLECH: Very much so—very quick fire.

NEUSTADT: They are all like that.

HARLECH: Yes. Anybody who starts on a long monologue wouldn't get very far—they'd be interrupted.

NEUSTADT: Now as a parent I have been fascinated by what the older Kennedys did for those children. How was it done—natural conscious?

[-74-]

HARLECH: Oh, I think it was conscious. I think there's no doubt that Ambassador Kennedy from the very beginning inculcated in them the need to do

something in public life—that you must make something of your life. You must consider even when you are on holiday what you were doing to prepare yourself for life. What was going to improve your mind, expand your experiences and so on and he impressed this upon them from a very early age. I don't think that alone—he wasn't a man of great intellect—I don't think that alone accounts for the remarkable qualities of the family. I mean I am rather a believer in heredity. I think there was a curious mixture of genes here between the Kennedys and Fitzgeralds which bred this very exceptional race of people. Of course, one of their most significant features was this excess of energy. Almost any excess—I mean they did have a plus in energy which was way above the normal human being.

NEUSTADT: Were they always characteristically alert, curious, talkative, competitive?

HARLECH: All those things.

NEUSTADT: Was the Embassy like this? Was the family circle like this?

HARLECH: Just the same. It was like this from the very first time I met them. They played games hard, they read hard, they travelled hard, they talked hard. They were restless, mentally restless, physically restless—never sat anywhere for very long—always moving about or going somewhere else.

NEUSTADT: It must have been an extraordinary crowd that descended upon London.

HARLECH: Yes. Always their plans were absolutely chaotic. I mean they would have a plan to go to Stockholm one weekend and they'd decide twelve hours before they'd go to the south of France instead. This has been typical of them I think ever

since. The idea that you were in any way restricted when there is some means of moving somewhere else just was abhorrent to them. If it seemed a good idea to suddenly go to California or to France of whatever it was, if there was some means of transport available why didn't you go. They never worried about the sort of mechanics of getting about the place—this they just took in their stride. They were brought up with that sort of an attitude—they all had it and they all operated on that basis.

NEUSTADT: It gives an extra not only energy but freedom to one's notion of what the world is. Is this easier for the boys to develop in than the girls? It sounds to me like a superb background for men.

HARLECH: Yes, I think that is probably true and the girls were rather boyish. They—most of them, took some time to marry for instance, and they all liked the Kennedy family life. I know that when boyfriends were brought in by the girls there was this rather cold appraisal by rows of brothers. If you didn't make it that

weekend with the family you were out. I remember one of the very close friends, Lem Billings, saying that really it was hair-raising to see a new young man introduced to the Kennedy Compound and wondering whether he was ever going to meet the standards required. Usually the standards were those required by the male members of the family. If they didn't measure up to the standards of the male members then the female members said they weren't any good—and that was the end of them.

NEUSTADT: It is extraordinary and a little chilling to the outside but it's fascinating. Where did he get this sense of excellence? Was this something....

[-76-]

HARLECH: I suppose he always had it naturally—he liked the best when he saw it but in certain areas the family, of course, did not pursue excellence in style. That is to say that until he married Jackie he really had no idea about how you should decorate a room or what was the difference between a pretty house and an ugly house and he certainly had no great feeling about good food or good wine. This was a new dimension which she introduced into the family. I think she found it rather tough going in the early stages. Because most of the others who had married into the family by then, or married subsequently into the family really went along with the Kennedy atmosphere. She wouldn't go along with the Kennedy atmosphere, she had certain standards of her own which she insisted on in her house. They were standards about the manners of the children, about having good food, about having beautiful furniture, the house well done up. In the early days he was apt to be pretty impatient with this. You know he was very happy just to have a steak and some ice cream and this was a normal meal and not too much worry about what you were going to eat. Certainly he had no worry about furniture. I remember him saying when Jackie had gone off and bought some French eighteenth-century chairs or something, "I don't know why, what's the point of spending all this money—I mean a chair is a chair and it's perfectly good the chair I'm sitting in—what's the point of all this fancy stuff." Well that was his first reaction but gradually he came to appreciate good taste in these other matters and really cared about it by the end. He was immensely proud about what she had done to the White House and indeed what she had done to all the houses that he lived in and having this built-in

[-77-]

instinct for excellence and a striving for it. I think that this marriage to Jackie did add a whole new dimension to his life and gave him all kinds of new pleasures in life which he hadn't had before.

NEUSTADT: But it's interesting that in spite of the enormous weight of the family when he saw something of a new dimension he dove into it.

HARLECH: Yes. This was typical of his restless mind—I think that perhaps restless is not quite the right word—exploring mind—he never did wish to conform

to a preconceived pattern of how you ought to conduct your life or what you ought to believe in in the way of political philosophy or anything of this kind. If new ideas came along he had an extraordinarily open mind—very unprejudiced mind. He was very good at discarding bogus theories and seeing through foolish ideas but he rather liked to hear them—he would sift them and he had no prejudices against people even with the most extreme views. He was interested, he was always happy to expand the boundaries of his mind and it was true in his reading—it was true about some physical things in life, where he lived, his surroundings, his food and in every way. He liked moving on—a very good phrase—to new frontiers. He found this exciting in his own personality.

NEUSTADT: Is it true that he was not pointed towards politics until after his older brother died? Or was he going in some other direction?

HARLECH: Well, I don't know personally about this. I think that perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that he was not pointed towards politics in view of the book he had written in 1940. It obviously did interest him. I think it is quite likely that towards the end of the war he wasn't

thinking particularly about going into politics and indeed at that age why should he. He probably thought there were many other things which were more attractive to do and then he gradually took it up. I think he changed his politics fairly considerably—I remember him telling me that when he was first a congressman looking back at the sort of speeches he made—he was extremely conservative, particularly on financial affairs—always talking about balanced budgets and fiscal responsibility and so on.

NEUSTADT: That persisted for quite a while really.

HARLECH: I think it did and he never was the sort of wild free spender that some of his opponents tried to make out. Nevertheless, because of this flexibility of mind he did come to understand Keynes [John Maynard Keynes] and so on and was convinced that these ideas rather than the very simple kind of financial outlook which no doubt was also propounded to him by his father were the right ones. It was only when he came to examine just how wrong the bankers usually were, about what was in their best interest that he became less conservative in his economic thinking.

NEUSTADT: Well this would suggest that that Yale speech which I know he took a great deal of pains over was in some sense talking about a road which he himself had travelled.

HARLECH: I think that's true and he was very disappointed at the reception of that speech. I don't think I ever saw him more depressed than a few days after it. We were having a talk and he just felt somehow hemmed in—he just felt that this weight of prejudice against any new move on the financial front was so heavy

that you just couldn't break through. He failed to break through at Yale—he didn't get a good

[-79-]

reception. He talked to a variety of businessmen around that time about the problems of the economy and what he thought might be done to stimulate it. They had produced no good ideas of their own but were deeply suspicious of any of his suggestions and he became convinced that businessmen were not necessarily, because of their background, the best judges of the long term economic interests of the whole country.

NEUSTADT: This is the first side of the fourth tape—interview by Richard Neustadt with the British Ambassador, Lord Harlech, for the Kennedy Library.

The picture you are painting is of a natural executive—this is not a very widely shared perception I don't think.

HARLECH: I suppose that's true because having won with a very slim margin, having hard trouble with Congress and having to deal with certain problems in the international field which aren't capable of simple, quick solutions you can easily build up a picture of somebody who is not tremendously decisive. But I think anybody who actually worked with him would know that that was completely untrue—he was basically extremely executive. At the end of a discussion he would never leave off with the whole thing in the air—he would always summarize and said, "Right—we've got three points now—there is this, there's that, there's the other and we must get ahead and do those." And he certainly liked taking decisions which actually brought about movement—action. You know he was always rather exasperated by people who talked very well but came to no very precise conclusion which you could translate into action.

NEUSTADT: And where he was indecisive was because he didn't see a way of... to move.

[-80-]

HARLECH: Yes. It was a deliberate judgment that this was not the moment to move—not the moment to take a decision—it wasn't an inability to take a decision. It was that you would be unwise to do it when you were still uncertain which the best course would be.

NEUSTADT: I think that that probably is the context in which to put our earlier conversation on the early stages of the MLF.

HARLECH: Yes. Exactly. It wasn't indecisiveness it was that he wished to be absolutely clear in his mind in which direction we ought to go before he threw his full weight behind it.

NEUSTADT: The Bay of Pigs business which we talked about a moment ago—I did not mean to suggest that I thought that his confidence in himself was shaken—I had the impression that his sense of what it took to manage this machine—he suddenly realized there were bigger dimensions than he had seen—and set out to cover them.

HARLECH: Yes. And of course the other thing that has got to be said about the Bay of Pigs is that of all the people who sat round deciding whether it was right to go ahead—I think he was the most doubtful. Of course, at that stage he didn't feel so assured of his own judgment that he felt it right to overrule all the expert advice that he had been given but I think instinctively he felt that this was an unwise decision. Although—because he was always very loyal in these ways—he never tried to get out, even in private conversation, of his responsibility for taking the decision. He did always say afterwards having seen what happened on that occasion, "I am going to rely more on my own judgment and I am going to see that what I think is right is in fact

carried into practice."

NEUSTADT: A very useful lesson then. I have never understood why he took the experts as seriously as he did but I suppose they were the experts in the fields in which he himself had had the least experience.

HARLECH: Obviously there are many people in the Administration who really know more about the events of those months certainly that I do. But I wouldn't regard as insignificant the fact that he had already overruled the military and a lot of the advice he got with regard to intervention in Laos. He had stood up to them over this—they were now recommending another strong course of action—perhaps he felt that so early in his presidency to again refuse that kind of advice might make him look as though he was a weak President. This could have had some effect on his judgment.

NEUSTADT: Sure, sure.

HARELCH: But I think if one person, one senior member of the National Security Council had come out clearly against it and made a strong argument against going ahead—I have a feeling that the President would have backed him up.

NEUSTADT: So do I. That's a tragedy of newness.

HARLECH: Of course he always worried about newness—particularly after that. But even in the first month that he took over he was deeply concerned about the frightening gap for the United States between an outgoing President and an incoming one. He told me that you don't even know which of your team you can

really trust from the point of view of their judgment. Unlike the British system where every member of your Cabinet is somebody you have been working with over the years and you've probably got a pretty shrewd idea which of them have good judgment and which have bad judgment—here

[-82-]

you pull together a scratch team, some of whom you have never met before in your life and you are immediately confronted with immensely important problems some of which will have worldwide repercussions. That is a dangerous period for the United States and for the new President under those circumstances. I think this worried him a great deal.

NEUSTADT: He gradually sorted these people out in his own mind I take it—well not so gradually.

HARLECH: No. I think on the whole very quickly—but of course speed was of the essence and there certainly were some months early on when it was very difficult for him to allocate weight of judgment to different people in the Administration—who really could be relied on and who could not.

NEUSTADT: He came to be very fond of Bob McNamara. Did he have any reservations about McNamara's judgment?

HARLECH: No. I don't think he did. In fact I remember when—just after Nassau when the Skybolt was fired and he was so angry—we mentioned this before—he said, "That's the first time I've ever known McNamara do anything silly—how he could have done that thing—this is the first error of judgment." What he did feel about McNamara is that he didn't have much political instinct. There was no reason why he should have—certainly not early on in his career. Therefore he knew that in matters where there was considerable political interest it was wise for him to give McNamara some guidance or to review his decisions in the light of political considerations. I don't think that meant that he admired him any the less because he felt that McNamara would learn.

[-83-]

NEUSTADT: I take it that in his relations with McNamara there was no lack of interest on his part on the major questions of policy. He wasn't just leaving policy to McNamara?

HARLECH: Oh, certainly not. Indeed the extent to which he was fascinated by foreign policy made him recognize that the defense policy of the United States was a very important part of it. He was terribly disturbed to find how unprepared the American military machine was for intervention in other parts of the world if it had been necessary. He recognized that the rapid buildup of the military capabilities of the United States was one of the key features of his whole foreign policy. Oh no, he took a very

deep interest, certainly in the broad outlines of defense policy and a good deal in the detail. He was always a person who had sudden whims and he would certainly put them to McNamara. No he knew in great detail what was going on in the Defense Department. He recognized that Bob McNamara had a tremendous flare for organization, for administering a department and that side of it. I am sure he knew that McNamara would take care of. But they certainly discussed and he had all kinds of views about the important broad policy decisions of the Defense Department.

NEUSTADT: Dean Rusk, I take it, was a much more complicated relationship.

HARLECH: Yes.

NEUSTADT: ...a more baffling one.

HARLECH: Yes. I think he was always disappointed that Dean Rusk didn't somehow pull the State Department together. He always regarded the State Department as a rather rambling uncoordinated department and became very impatient with it

[-84-]

at times. I think he had a respect for Dean Rusk. For of course Dean Rusk has got a very fine mind and can very concisely put a situation to a group of people and to the President. I think it was a feeling that he lacked much originality of thought that he didn't come up with very many new ideas—not just for the sake of new ideas but a judgment of what might be done in particular circumstances—that he didn't seem to be very resourceful in his thinking which was unlike the President. This made Kennedy rather impatient. Then just as characters they were rather far apart. There was never any great intimacy developed between them.

NEUSTADT: True. He did like getting new ideas. He would have been glad to be pushed.

HARLECH: Yes. He would have liked new ideas—even though some of them would have been put forward tentatively. That is to say the Secretary of State might have said, "Well perhaps we ought to look at this—my first judgment is that it wouldn't be the right thing to do but nevertheless this is one idea that has come up." I think it was that everything was put up in a rather secure, rather conservative package, carefully staffed out with really no alternatives—it was this sort of an approach to dealing with foreign policy problems which dissatisfied him. But it is also true that he minded so much about foreign policy himself that any Secretary of State would, I think, have had something of the same position as Rusk.

NEUSTADT: Yes. To come back to him as a person and to his relations with Mrs. Kennedy. I take it in some deep respects they complimented each other.

HARLECH: Yes. They both expanded each other's characters tremendously. On the other hand in their approach to public

[-85-]

life they were very different. She instinctively disliked a very gregarious existence where she was continuously exposed to public gaze. She also, I think, felt that it was right to preserve a kind of private life for him. She felt that perhaps he wouldn't have defended his private life terribly well if just left to his own devices. She recognized that it was valuable for him and that therefore he should be made to accept it—also enjoyable for him that he should be totally withdrawn from public life from time to time. Therefore she conceived it right to try and avoid serious conversation when he was supposed to be relaxing and rather deliberately made fun of serious topics—would sometimes I think quite deliberately make a foolish remark about the political situation just to see him explode. It was this sort of lighthearted approach when he was away from work which I think she thought was very important for him and I think it intrigued him and was very valuable to him. But of course he was very gregarious—I mean he rather liked driving through crowds. He rather liked stopping by a group of complete strangers and shaking their hands and having a brief chat with them. He didn't mind when they shouted "Hello Jack" or something. But she, you could see, absolutely curled up at people shouting "Hello Jackie" who had never seen her before. She'd just turn away and you could feel a strong resistance to this kind of a life.

NEUSTADT: Yet she went down to that last tour...

HARLECH: Oh yes, she knew that she had a duty and when she was on duty and thought that it was right that she should make the effort she did it. And she did splendidly on official tours. But when—in ordinary home life—you just motored down to the beach and a lot of people, who consistently

[-86-]

voted and worked against him came all round him and all round her—she was not prepared to put on a show on those occasions. She would just look absolutely blank and not cooperate.

NEUSTADT: She was not prepared either I take it to have dozens upon dozens of Congressional wives touring her bedroom and that kind of thing.

HARLECH: No. Absolutely repugnant to her—that kind of life. I suppose from some political points of view this was a disadvantage. On the other hand he wouldn't have been the kind of President with the particular style he had without her—so there were advantages and disadvantages. Partly it was just a human thing—he didn't mind that a great deal of his life was lived in a goldfish bowl—she did mind and she was determined that a slice of his life should not be in a goldfish bowl and certainly not her life and their children's lives.

NEUSTADT: Yet he did want a piece of his life to himself. So she was right in that extent—she knew what she was doing.

HARLECH: Yes, absolutely.

NEUSTADT: You know he is supposed to have been a man who hated passion. You spoke about his sensitivity to those German crowds, yet I think there is some misunderstanding about the meaning of distaste for passion. He was not, I take it, a fellow incapable of very deep feeling?

HARLECH: No, I think he had very deep feelings. You know you couldn't have as sensitive a character as that who didn't have deep feelings and he was extraordinarily sensitive. I mean the trouble he'd take with a shy girl of 15 who he found sitting next to him at a dinner table or somewhere.

Then I remember the sort of instance at the end of the first America's Cup Race in 1962. As soon as the Australian Yacht crossed the line he turned round to his Naval Aide and said: "Pull down my flag and send it across to the Australian boat." No, I think he had deep emotions. He very much disliked the display of them. But I think that he had deep emotions and strong passions underneath and when his friends were hurt or a tragedy occurred or his child died, I think he felt it very deeply. But somehow public display was anathema to him.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore) Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List