William H. Attwood Oral History Statement – 11/8/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: William H. Attwood
Interviewer: None
Date of Interview: November 8, 1965
Place of Interview: Nairobi, Kenya
Length: 13 pages

Biographical Note
Attwood, a member of John F. Kennedy's (JFK) presidential campaign staff in 1960, Ambassador to Guinea from 1961 to 1963, and special adviser to the U.S. delegation to United Nations from 1963 to 1964, discusses the 1960 presidential campaign, U.S.-Guinea relations, and JFK's foreign policy in Africa, among other issues.

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William H. Attwood, recorded statement, November 8, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Signed: William Attwood

William Attwood

Date: March 7, 1971

William H. Attwood

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Oral History Statement

By

WILLIAM H. ATTWOOD

November 8, 1965
Nairobi, Kenya

For the John F. Kennedy Library

Although I went to school with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], I did not really get to know him until 1959 when we met occasionally at the home of a mutual friend, Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee]. But the occasions were usually social, and it was not until June of 1960 that I had any meaningful discussion with him involving either politics or foreign policy.

In the spring of that year I had become involved in the coming campaign to the extent that I was preparing speech material for Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], who at that time was considering remaining available in case the Convention was deadlocked and he would become the nominee. Although many of us had no particular desire to encourage a Stevenson nomination, the possibility of a deadlock was very much in many people's minds at the time. Even though the primaries indicated that Kennedy had the nomination all but won, pressures began to mount on Stevenson to declare himself, and "Draft Stevenson" clubs

were mushrooming around the country. Yet he remained, officially, a non-candidate.

In June, Bradlee suggested that I meet Kennedy at his house because Kennedy was naturally interested in what Stevenson's plans were for the Convention, and it was important there be no misunderstanding between them. Kennedy was then confident that he had almost enough Convention votes, but he wanted Stevenson's public backing--both as insurance for the Convention and also because he knew he would need the all-out support of Stevenson's loyal legions in the campaign. Therefore, in mid-June, we met for dinner; and Kennedy, looking very chipper and confident, asked me just exactly what Stevenson was up to, and why he was stalling and not declaring himself one way or the other. It was a hard question to answer. I tried to explain that Stevenson's chief concern was Nixon's [Richard Milhous Nixon] defeat and that, so far as I could tell, he still wanted to remain available for a draft in case the Convention should deadlock with no one to unite behind. The work I had been doing was to prepare material in advance of the campaign so that Stevenson would be prepared, just in case. Kennedy retorted that he had the nomination sewed up and that Stevenson would find that he was making a big mistake by declining to make up his mind. I mentioned Walter Lippmann's advocacy of a Stevenson-Kennedy ticket. To this suggestion, Kennedy replied flatly that he would never take the second spot, no matter what happened at the Convention. I tried to point out that if the unlikely did take place and the Convention wanted him on

the ticket, it would be hard to refuse. But he was absolutely adamant, and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline B. Kennedy], who was present, emphatically backed him up. He then added a few more unflattering remarks about Stevenson's political acumen.

Later the conversation turned to the campaign itself. Kennedy relaxed, and we discussed tactics to be used against Mr. Nixon. I had been preparing material for Stevenson and assured him it would be available to whomever the candidate was. Kennedy asked me whether I'd be willing to join his staff after the nomination, and I said I would. Towards the end of the evening, he was practicing chip shots with a golf club on the rug and asking Ben and myself and Ken Crawford [Kenneth G. Crawford], who was present, whether we thought Stevenson or Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] would make the best Secretary of State.

After the Convention I went to Washington and joined the Kennedy speech-writing staff. I would see Kennedy from time to time in connection with speeches. Once, at Joe Alsop's [Joseph W. Alsop], he remarked that the speeches he made would be less and less important as the campaign progressed. "By mid-October it will be just Nixon and me." he said. "The voter will be looking at us more than listening to us."

In September I joined the campaign plane which was then touring California, Texas, Missouri, and other points. One thing that was evident during this trip was that many of the Stevenson people were still sulking after Los Angeles

and were not getting out and ringing doorbells for Kennedy. Some even said they were going to sit out the election. So I suggested to Kennedy that since Stevenson was scheduled to make a series of speeches on his behalf, I'd

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be more useful traveling with Stevenson and making sure that he said the right things. Kennedy readily agreed, and a week later I joined Stevenson for a speech-making tour of the country. He made at least seventy speeches. We kept in contact with Kennedy during this period and passed material back and forth. The only time that Stevenson actually talked to Kennedy during October, at least while I was with him, was when a memorandum came out from the Kennedy staff implying that we should support an invasion of Cuba by the exiles. Stevenson, who was due to make a television appearance on this subject the next day, called Kennedy and wanted to know what the position was. I was also on the telephone. Kennedy was upset by this memorandum, I remember, and told Stevenson to "get back on the high ground" and say that Cuba was a problem more for the OAS (Organization of American States)--which Stevenson did.

After the election, when I was appointed Ambassador to Guinea, I naturally saw the President a couple of times before leaving for Africa in March. He told me that he still believed that Sekou Tourè, the President of Guinea, was basically a nationalist and that Guinea, which looked as though it were becoming the Cuba of West Africa, was not, in his opinion, a lost cause. He wanted me to find out whether Tourè himself was in fact a true nationalist. However, he did make the point that he was quite shocked at a statement that Tourè made in January suggesting that we had been responsible for the assassination of Lumumba [Patrice Lumumba], the Congolese leader. I transmitted this message when I saw Tourè in Guinea. Then when I returned to Washington a few weeks later

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in May, I was able to report to the President that Guinea was, in fact, becoming disillusioned with the Communists and that, with a little bit of help from our side--a modest aid program--we could, I thought, bring Guinea around to a position of nonalignment. The President agreed and said if AID can find the money, he was all for it. This was very helpful to me. Knowing the negative bureaucracy in Washington, I would need to be able to go to the AID people and the State Department people and tell them that the President was in favor of it. It certainly made the wheels turn a little faster.

In these talks we had about aid for Guinea and other matters, the President, even then, expressed considerable exasperation with the slowness of the bureaucracy, both in State and AID. He said it was always hard to get decisions and action out of them. At any rate, I did go back to Guinea with approval for a modest program. Kennedy also agreed to send Sargent Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.] over to Guinea to talk to Tourè, which established a good personal

relation between President Tourè and the Kennedy family. And, of course, family relationships--personal relationships--are all important in dealing with Africans.

I saw the President again on a couple of occasions in the fall when I returned and was hospitalized with a case of polio--and again the following year when I returned from Guinea with President Tourè. We lunched at the White House. Afterwards, the President took Tourè upstairs and introduced him to Mrs. Kennedy and the children [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy and John F. Kennedy, Jr.]. This made a tremendous impression on Tourè, who thereafter regarded Kennedy as a personal friend.

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I would say that Kennedy, from the various talks I had with him while I was an Ambassador, was generally sympathetic to African nationalist aspirations; curious about the new breed of leaders, and more than casually interested in at least four African countries--the Congo, Ghana, Guinea, and Algeria. He was interested in the Congo, I think, because it was such a mess; Ghana because of Nkrumah [Kwame Nkrumah] and because it was the first of the new independent nations; Guinea because of Sekou Tourè and, as I pointed out, the possibility of its becoming an African Cuba; and Algeria because he'd made a widely publicized speech about it and felt identified with its history.

And he was always helpful to me in getting red tape cut. I recall that in 1962, after meeting with Tourè at the White House, he decided we should do something quickly to help Guinea's palm oil industry. I remember standing on the White House steps with one of the AID people who began raising objections to the necessary time it would take to set up this little palm oil factory. The President jabbed his finger at him and told him to get going, and that he wanted a report about it within a month. That's one thing we got action on pretty quickly.

I do think that Tourè's visit with the President that day, brief as it was, was most important. They talked with simultaneous interpretation. Tourè left the White House feeling that he had somebody there who understood him. And Kennedy referred to me as "an old Democratic politician," which, coming from him, was high praise indeed. This helped me, of course, with President

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Tourè when I got back to Guinea because he felt that I did have access to the White House. He probably thought I had more access than I actually had. Nevertheless, it was useful; it helped me in my job. Kennedy did this, as far as I could see, with most ambassadors and strengthened their hand by giving the leaders of the countries they were accredited to the feeling that they could communicate directly to the White House. Ambassadors in new countries, especially, need to have this kind of prestige.

A couple of weeks after this visit to the White House we were in the midst of the Cuban Crisis. I think the feeling that Tourè had for Kennedy was a factor in his

denying the Russians the use of the Conakry airport--which they wanted to use to fly planes from Russia to Cuba. I know that ever after personal letters and messages went to the White House from Guinea from President Tourè at the slightest pretext. Of course, Tourè would invite Kennedy to Guinea repeatedly; but, naturally, it was very different for the President to leave the country, particularly to go to Africa.

The only other two African countries I recall discussing with President Kennedy were Mali and Ghana. On Mali, he once told me he thought that Mali was gone--down the drain. This was based on an anti-American demonstration there. I disagreed, saying that no country was ever gone in Africa, and predicted we'd see a change when the new ambassador went there. I think there was, to some extent, a change. But, of course, Mali was a country he didn't really know much about.

On Ghana, we once discussed the Volta Dam. He felt that we never should have made the commitment to help build the dam considering Nkrumah's

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erratic policies, but that, having made the commitment, we should go ahead because it would look worse if we backed out.

In general, I would say that Kennedy's interest in Africa was marginal--he had many other greater foreign policy problems--but that his impulses were right, and that he knew how to make African leaders feel that he cared about them and their problems--if only by breathing life into a few clichés about independence and dignity and memorizing some facts about their countries. I know that he would get exasperated over the enormous talking papers that were sent over to the White House by the State Department before he met these African leaders. On two occasions I had to knock out brief one page summaries of what he should know--which I think he found much more useful.

As for African policy during the Kennedy Administration, the main changes were that we began to talk to Africans about Africa as Americans and not as junior partners of France and England. Also, we became less suspicious of genuine nonalignment. So far as Africans were concerned, these changes did add up to a new policy. Moreover, it was under Kennedy that we sent new and different people to Africa as ambassadors. By new and different, I mean, on the whole, younger people--also people from outside the government who had had some experience in politics. This is most important in dealing with these young African leaders who know very little about old-fashioned diplomatic protocol but who understand and like to talk politics.

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Those of us like myself, Phil Kaiser [Philip M. Kaiser], Bill Mahoney [William P. Mahoney Jr.], Edward Korry [Edward M. Korry], Charles Darlington [Charles F. Darlington] and others who had been involved, peripherally at least, in politics were able to talk to these leaders in a much more meaningful way than some of the career diplomats.

I came back from Guinea in June of 1963. When I saw the President he suggested that I should next go to South America, where he had a very special interest. I spent the summer, as a result, learning some Spanish. We never had long talks during this period, but we managed usually to cover a lot of ground. We occasionally had talks about people we used to know, but usually we stuck to the subject. He liked people who could get to the point and talk tersely and concisely, as he did.

In the fall I went to the United Nations and actually did not see the President between September and the assassination. I did hear from him: In October I had an article published in *Look* magazine, and he took the trouble of writing me a note to say he liked it. I also became involved, while at the UN, with the Cuban situation. I was approached by the Cuban Ambassador to the UN, or rather, feelers came out from him that Castro [Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz] would like to normalize relations with us. How this would be done would be left for discussions later on, but he made it plain that Castro was thinking of some kind of a deal. Stevenson had made a speech suggesting that we could have normal relations with Cuba if they stopped their subversion in Latin America, and if they cut their Communist ties; in other words, if they behaved

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like a member in good standing of the American family of nations.

Perhaps as a result of this speech, the feelers began. At any rate, I told Stevenson and Governor Harriman [William Averell Harriman] about them. I also flew down to Washington and informed Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] about it. It was decided that I would go on listening to what they had to say and express some interest and report to Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] at the White House. As a result of the ensuing informal talks I had with the Cuban Ambassador, the President decided that it might be useful for me to go down to Cuba and see Castro, which was what the Cubans suggested. But first we'd have to know what the agenda was. About a week before he died, I found myself on the telephone talking to one of Castro's aides and saying that we had to have an agenda and know just what needed to be said before I went. I reported this in a memorandum the week Kennedy was shot. Castro's reply came through the day after he died, proposing an agenda and suggesting these talks.

Nothing ever came of this. Although I wrote a memorandum for Stevenson, who passed it on to President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], the possibility of a rapprochement, or normalizing of relations, was stalled, I suppose, by his assassination. Of course, there's no way of knowing whether anything would have come of it. But, nevertheless, it was typical, I think, of him to explore the possibility. All through the fall, of course, the first moves--and all the moves--were made from the Cuban side.We took no initiative on our own other than to respond to theirs.

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I want to emphasize I didn't see the President very often. I think I probably talked to him perhaps fifteen times during the period he was President--not more. But I always felt he had an understanding of what the so-called nonaligned nations of the world wanted. He had a feeling for other people; he was able to make the leaders of these new nations feel comfortable, feel at home, and feel that he was interested in them--which, of course, was half the battle. Knowing how these people were received in the White House under the previous administration, I know what a difference that made.

So far as the people he took into the government after he was President, such as myself, it was interesting that--despite the strong feeling in the Kennedy camp about the people who were organizing the Stevenson movement in 1960--the President never, so far as I could see, held it against anybody who didn't support him before the Convention. Many people who worked for and with Stevenson in that spring, nearly all who were interested, anyway, came into the Kennedy Administration--George Ball, Tom Finletter [Thomas K. Finletter], Adlai Stevenson himself, Bill Blair [William McCormick Blair, Jr.], Bill Wirtz [William Willard Wirtz], Newton Minow [Newton N. Minow], myself, John Bartlow Martin and others. There was nothing vindictive about Kennedy.

One last word about Africa: the President, as I say, was very good at personal diplomacy, and I'm sure that had he had the chance, eventually, to go to Africa, he could have accomplished a great deal. I've found out, after

returning to Africa since his death, that the Kennedy legend is very great, and a lot of the good will for our policies is still due to what he said and did in those two-and-a-half years. We needed that momentum in the first few months of the Johnson Administration. For example, there are many people in Kenya named after him. Even though he was never in Kenya, many people felt that he was the first American leader who ever really understood Africa.

Finally, on two of the burning issues that mean a lot to Africans--that is, the problem of South Africa and the Portuguese colonies--he was sympathetic to the African view. I recall once talking to him about the problem we had with the European Bureau of the State Department--which was against our taking an anti-Portuguese position on these issues when they arose in the United Nations. This disturbed the President. He said on one occasion, "What would they say if there was a tidal wave, and the Azores just disappeared under the sea? Are they all that vital?" (One of the arguments, naturally, that the European Bureau was giving us was that the Azores were vital to us, and that we couldn't risk antagonizing Portugal.) And it is true that at the UN our voting pattern did change and was more in harmony with that of the majority of the UN under his Administration than it had ever been before.

One of the problems Ambassadors had was getting to the President when we came home on consultation. The White House staff was enormously pro-

-tective of his time. I know that many ambassadors would put in their requests for appointments through the State Department but would never get to see the President. He often didn't know about these requests. I recall one occasion in the summer of 1963; I'd been in town for two weeks and had asked to see him. But nothing had happened. When I met him at a party in Joe Alsop's garden in Georgetown he was quite surprised to see me back in town and asked me why I hadn't come over. I explained that the appointments had been held up, and he said, "Oh, well, just call up Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], and come on over in the morning," which I did. This didn't always please the staff. This happened, I think, on three occasions where I would bump into him at a party, and he would tell me to come over. It was unfortunate in some cases that ambassadors and others who needed to see him couldn't get through. Of course, this happens under all administrations. I've had this same experience with the present Administration. But I know that he didn't like it that way. He wanted to talk to people who had been out in the field and get their views.

[END OF STATEMENT]

William H. Attwood Oral History Transcript
Name List