

**Sir Alec Douglas-Home Oral History Statement – 3/17/1965**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Douglas-Home, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations (1955-1963), Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1960-1963), and Prime Minister (1963-1964) of the United Kingdom, discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) handling of foreign affairs, JFK's decision-making abilities, and JFK's ability to listen, among other issues.

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By Sir Alec Douglas-Home

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Sir Alec Douglas-Home

Date: March 19<sup>th</sup> 1966

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Date: April 18 1966

## Sir Alec Douglas-Home

### Table of Contents

1	First impressions of John F. Kennedy (JFK)
2, 4	Foreign affairs
2	JFK's Ability to listen
3	Decision-making

Oral History Statement

By

SIR ALEC DOUGLAS-HOME

March 17, 1965  
London, England

For the John F. Kennedy Library

The first things which attracted me about Jack Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] before he became President were his capacity for clear thought and unequivocal speech. It seemed to me that he had, to a quite exceptional degree in a young man, the gift of decision and, therefore, given the opportunity, of leadership.

When I saw his television encounters with the very experienced and knowledgeable Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] before the presidential election, I felt that, although he met his match in the technical niceties of argument, his breadth of view and grasp of essentials would make him an outstanding President. He was gay and modern, but had above all a depth of sincerity which all could sense and see.

The great test was clearly going to be his handling of the international scene. I confess I was disquieted when, instead of giving himself time to play himself into

[-1-]

international affairs, he launched into a meeting with Mr. Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev]. I did not think he would have overestimated himself or underestimated his opponent. He never did either again, but on that occasion he made, in my opinion, a very bad mistake from which it took a lot of time to recover. Khrushchev, being a very shrewd man, probably summed up the situation fairly well, but his advisors almost certainly concluded that here was a young man 'round whom Khrushchev could make rings. They found out that they were wrong but only after the most anxious months of trial and error and brinkmanship.

The next qualities which came out time and again as I got to know him better and watch his method of working was his ability to listen, or rather his preference for listening. He would say little, getting everyone else to talk, then ask a very few pointed, and sometimes awkward questions, never sparing his own advisors, and finally say, "Well, why cannot we do this or that? It seems the common sense way." And it usually was. I noticed, too, that he would not automatically accept a brief, and he always kept in reserve the right to vary or reject its conclusions. But, once the decision was taken, that was that, and there were no second thoughts or regrets.

[-2-]

I think the first example I had of this reliance on his own judgment, after hearing all sides of the case, was his reversal of America's previous policy over Laos in 1961. He did not take this decision in a hurry as he saw the dangers of an advance of Chinese Communists in Southeast Asia using the North Vietnamese as their tools. He heard all the arguments, was, I think, convinced by Governor Harriman [William Averell Harriman], and then backed the Geneva Settlement all out. He realized that even United States armies could be lost in the jungles and mountains of the northern part of Southeast Asia. At the present time it still remains to be seen whether or not his and our judgment on this was right.

The second occasion was during the Nassau talks on whether or not Britain was to be given the Polaris deterrent. I have no doubt that all his advisors were dead against Britain's getting the weapon, and they told him so. He kept an open mind. I was fairly sure that he would decide in Britain's favor from my knowledge of the man. First, he knew that a country with a record such as we had could not, in effect, totally hand over our defense to another power, however friendly. It was something we could not give, and, therefore, he could not ask it of us. Secondly,

[-3-]

he had talked to me earlier about the hideous responsibility which he alone carried for the safety of the free world in that he, as President, carried the sole decision to declare nuclear war if the British Prime Minister was not with him to help and to assist. I believe that he felt relief that there were people in the world in whom he could place absolute trust, who would not let him down, but would do all in their power to help him and his country to share these terrible cares. He told me several times how much he valued being able to talk with Mr. Macmillan [Maurice Harold Macmillan] and with the British because he could do so without reserve—something he could not do with any other people.

His greatest preoccupation during 1961 and 1962 was the threat to Berlin. He realized that there could be no surrender in West Berlin, and he made the attitude of his country clear beyond doubt. The Russians, after the Khrushchev encounter in Vienna, were doubtful whether he meant what he said, but in the long testing time of trial they gradually began to recognize that President Kennedy meant exactly what he said when he declared that aggression against Berlin would mean nuclear retaliation. The Russians respect power—

indeed, they respect little else – and they recognized that Kennedy had the nerve, the will, and the power.

[-4-]

The final test was in Cuba where Khrushchev, the realist, quickly recognized that he was up against a man whose nerve could not be broken. Out of that crisis, in sharp contrast to the Vienna meeting, there came the nearest thing one can get to a meeting of minds between a capitalist leader and a communist dictator. It was, I am certain, Jack Kennedy's clear thinking, clear talking, and clear power of decision which won that day and marked the beginning of the end of the cold war, and probably the start of closer relations between the Soviet and the West. Khrushchev concluded that the USSR could not fight the United States, but that under such leadership as Kennedy gave it might be possible to do business. This was the first time that a Russian leader had thought in this way.

I think that the President was in his element in politics in those matters which are in essence human. There his instincts were sure. That is proved not only by his effect on the Russians and Eastern Europeans but on the Africans, Asians, and, generally the "have-nots." They recognized the idealism and the desire to serve humanity at large.

I'd heard him on a number of occasions become very impatient with Europe; with Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer] over his rigidity; and

[-5-]

with de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] over what he considered to be the general, blinkered nationalism. His support for the Common Market, the Kennedy Round, and the Multi-Lateral Force all rose from the feeling that Europe, having recovered from the war, must do more to stand on its own feet. American resources were being expended in Europe on a very large scale. Although Kennedy, as President, was willing to sustain Europe's freedom as an essential bulwark of the free world and of the United States, he felt strongly that Europe ought to do more to defend itself, and that the European members of NATO should combine more effectively to do so. At my last meeting with him, when we walked in the garden in the White House, he talked of de Gaulle and said that he felt that megalomania had taken charge, and that no business could be done with a man who cared for nothing except what he himself judged to be the selfish interests of France.

I cannot judge of the effects of his presidency on the internal affairs of the United States, but I think there can be no doubt at all that the historian will find that it was his clear diagnosis of the purpose of the Communist bloc and his actions based on that analysis which first split the bloc in half and then opened the way for a gradual

[-6-]

move towards a more constructive coexistence. Had the President of the United States faltered even for a moment, the Communists would have risked war, and the nuclear holocaust would have been upon us. Kennedy did not falter over Berlin or over Cuba. He,



therefore, won, but with the magnanimity of a mature statesman he gave his enemy the opportunity to start again and to be friends. The Test Ban Treaty was the beginning of a policy which was designed to lead on to other things if the Communists demonstrated good faith. Again, President Kennedy carried through the Test Ban Treaty overriding the advice of a great many of his own advisors. I think it will be found that Kennedy's presidency marked a permanent change in the relations between the Soviet Union and the West, and that his character and qualities and leadership will be give the pride of place in this achievement.

Personally, I found him the most likeable of companions. There are some people with whom one knows one can do business with the minimum of formality and explanation. Jack Kennedy with his clear, direct approach was one of these, and it was a tonic and a joy to be with him.

Sir Alec Douglas-Home Oral History Transcript  
Name List

**A**

Adenauer, Konrad, 5

**D**

de Gaulle, Charles A., 6

**H**

Harriman, William Averell, 3

**K**

Kennedy, John F., 1-7

Khrushchev, Nikita S., 2, 4, 5

**M**

Macmillan, Maurice Harold, 4

**N**

Nixon, Richard M., 1