Robert W. Komer Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 06/18/1964
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Biographical Note
Komer was a senior staff member of the National Security Council from 1961 through 1965. In this interview Komer discusses John F. Kennedy's [JFK] stance on U.S. foreign policy during his presidency; JFK's affinity for preventive diplomacy; comparisons between JFK and previous Presidents on foreign policy focus; JFK's intellectual curiosity and "flair for detail," and his willingness to make the unpopular decision, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT KOMER

June 18, 1964

For the John F. Kennedy Library

JFK AND THE THIRD WORLD

It strikes me that the most interesting contribution I might make for the oral history is on the subject of Kennedy and the neutralists. This is, to me, one of the most interesting but certainly least known aspects of the President's foreign policy, largely because it didn't get a great deal of press attention, which is a story in itself and a blessing in disguise to some of us at any rate. But to me it was an extremely significant and highly successful aspect of the shift in American policy which took place under the New Frontier. What I mean by Kennedy's policy toward the neutralists is, at least as far as I was involved in it, his policy toward the major neutralists personalities--largely the Nassers, the Nehrus, the Sukarnos, the Ben Bellas of this world. An additional personality that comes into play is [Kwame] Nkrumah, but I wasn't involved in that particular exercise.

Two generalizations need to be made at the outset. Then we can get on to some specific examples. The first is that, in at least this particular area, policy toward the neutralists, it was very much a period of Presidential diplomacy. The President was his own Secretary of State in dealing with what we might loosely call Middle East affairs. This was the case because the Secretary of State was very heavily engaged in Soviet matters, Western European involvement, the Far East. [McGeorge] Mac Bundy, by instinct and training, generally tended to look at the same problem areas. But with respect to the Middle East and Africa at least, there really wasn't the same high degree of interest on the part of senior officials of the government that there was on the part of the President

himself. An interesting confirmation of this was a remark made to me by [Phillips] Phil Talbot, who is the responsible Assistant Secretary in the Middle East area. I think the very night of Kennedy's assassination he said precisely the same thing to me in a sentimental exchange of drinks and worry at his house. Phil said, "You know, one of the great things about the New Frontier was the President's own personal handling of the affairs in which you and I, Bob, were involved. He really was the Secretary of State. We didn't deal with the Seventh Floor on Middle East policy very much. We really dealt directly with the White House."

Other evidence of this from the physical record itself is the sheer number of Presidential letters. The style of personal Presidential diplomacy was nowhere more effectively illustrated than in the fact that the President conducted an awful lot of this over his own signature and in his own hand. This was terribly important because we were dealing with a large group of charismatic personalities. In most of the less developed world there is no firmly structured constitutional system or anything like that. It is very largely a matter of personal government. Kennedy himself sensed very quickly that through personal communication with these heads of state and the prime ministers, the key foci of power in these countries, he could far more effectively carry out the policy objectives that he had rather firmly in mind. Not only can you find the evidence in the President's own correspondence but also in the fact that he cleared personally almost every, I would say probably every, major foreign policy move in the entire Middle East area. They were all given the personal Presidential chop, and when they weren't, we heard about it. So we quickly didn't try to conduct policy without keeping him fully clued.

An early example of how he jumped in very quickly was the Iran task force when we had one of our periodic crises in Iran in, as I recall, April of 1961. The Shah was in one of his periodic moods of depression; the political opposition seemed to be getting his goat. The President moved right in and set up what was quite fashionable at the time, though I believe it was the last example of the art, an Iran task force. He personally stage-managed it and insisted on guiding the working out of a new policy toward Iran. This, as far as I'm concerned,

was the first time we had taken a constructive long-range point of view of where we wanted to go in Iran instead of resorting to a series of short-term expedients, such as [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and [John] Foster Dulles' famous midnight commitment in 1959 for an additional fifty billion or so of baksheesh to the Shah when he was feeling particularly upset by the revolution in Iraq.

Cyprus was another example of the President's taste for preventive diplomacy. It was as early as August 1961 that he put out one of these famous NSAM's [National Security Action Memoranda] in which he said we are just going to have to play a more active role in Cyprus in order to prevent this thing from going sour. And I must say that his words seem awfully prescient today. I proposed and drafted it, of course.

The Moroccan base problem was another one where he jumped in early.

To go on, the second big area of generalization which I think important is the President's own equipment for dealing with this type of problem area. To me, John Kennedy was the first American President who really understood the nationalist revolution and the revolution of modernization in the underdeveloped areas and the necessity of both adjusting to it and feeding it in order to guide it in directions that served our interests. FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] is regarded as one of the great apostles of the decolonization process, but to me FDR was sort of a romantic. He was all for Indian independence; he saw that the African colonies were in their time going to have to become independent; he pressed the British. But the real period of decolonization did not begin, of course, until after FDR's death so he was in a sense one of the progenitors. But he did not have to deal with the less developed countries and their leaders themselves.

Harry Truman had the same instincts as FDR. He, too, was all in favor of self-determination. But our foreign policy in Truman's Administration was dominated by the Berlin Blockade, the creation of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], the Korean War, and the major East-West issues in a way which did not permit much time for dealing with the incipient nationalist revolution which was just beginning.

As for the Dulles-Eisenhower period, it seems to me that this was one of consolidation, a period in which, perhaps because of the way we saw the East-West conflict, the necessity as seen at the time was constructing an interlocking system of alliances to contain what was over-regarded as a military threat outward from the perimeter of the bloc. We shifted our focus, and we were not really terribly successful in conveying an impression of our willingness, indeed our desire, to work with the less developed countries in order to help them toward solutions which would be compatible with our own way of looking at things.

So Kennedy had to make a change in policy, or we were really going to find ourselves behind the eight ball. It's interesting to me that [Joseph V.] Stalin, too, had the same black and white approach to the less developed world that John Foster Dulles did. With Stalin, too, it was a case of either you're with us or "agin" us; either you sign alliances with us, in which case you're friends, or you're neutralist and woolly-headed, in which case we don't trust you. This was a rigid and moralistic view of the world which simply didn't coincide with the realities of life in the third areas as we've since come to understand them.

[Nikita S.] Khrushchev, once he began getting involved in foreign affairs after Stalin's death, did change Soviet policy in this respect. In effect, he borrowed from us the devices of foreign aid--military and economic, the devices of willing to live with bourgeois nationalist regimes in the less developed world so long as they were reasonably nonaligned. Take his policy toward the U.A.R. [United Arab Republic], where we gave him a free ride by the Aswan Dam fiasco, etc., etc.

But the point I am trying to make is that Kennedy both saw the need for a more sensible policy toward the major neutralists and was intellectually committed to an understanding of the need. He really felt that we had to have a new balance in our policy, that we had to get away from this overemphasis on alliances, this sort of casting into the outer darkness those countries which for one reason or another didn't feel they should be tied to Washington as opposed to Moscow.

One exception to this policy with respect to the Eisenhower Administration was the policy toward India where, despite the fact that we strongly disliked and on occasion vigorously opposed Nehru's foreign policies, we inaugurated and continued a major foreign aid program. It was an interesting dichotomy. We saw the necessity of building up India domestically, but we never saw the parallel necessity for adjusting to India's external policies and for a political rapprochement which would complement and carry forward the process of economic development. An interesting example of double-think as far as I'm concerned.

The third aspect of the President's equipment, which was always borne in on me every time that I talked with him or sent him a briefing memorandum and got back his comments and requests, was his insatiable intellectual curiosity. This was one of the things that made Presidential diplomacy both feasible and desirable. Kennedy was the most knowledgeable man on the Middle East in the top echelon of his Administration. He literally knew more about the matter than the Secretary of State; he was more up on what was going on than Mac Bundy even, because he read everything. He gobbled up all of the intelligence reports, the State Department daily summary, the press and secondary sources.

I recall an embarrassing incident when he asked me about an article in the New Republic, and I said, "I haven't seen it yet, Mr. President. I'll go take a look and let you know." So I got the latest issue of the New Republic, and the only article in it that I could find which seemed relevant to what I was doing was one on our policy toward Communist China. It

seemed a perfectly inoffensive article but not a terribly significant one either. So when I saw him the next day, I said, "Mr. President, that article about Communist China was, seemed to be rather dull. What was it that struck you?" He said, "Oh, I don't mean that article. I was talking about the article on Yemen." And then he picked up an advance copy of next month's edition of the New Republic. Hell, it wasn't even due to be published for a couple of weeks, and I hadn't a clue. So he wasn't only up with the news, he was ahead of it.

To return to Kennedy's flair for detail, his ability to comprehend all facets of the subject, this was nowhere more evident than in his handling of foreign visitors. This was a repeated refrain as I would get it back from the ambassadors or in some cases from the visitors themselves. They uniformly continued to be amazed at the President's grasp of their own problems. He would sprinkle in facts and figures; he would ask about various personalities; he would comment on recent occurences in a way that almost invariably made the visitor go away thinking, "Ye gods, that man knows more about the problems of our country than I do." In fact, a couple of them commented precisely to that effect. I forget who they were at the moment. This gave the President an ability to communicate about concrete problems with these visitors that was one of the hallmarks of his conduct of personal diplomacy.

I had the impression--as one who had been around for fifteen years in the bureaucracy--that during the Eisenhower period, the State Department (particularly under Foster Dulles) got into the rut of thinking that Presidential meetings with distinguished foreigners were primarily for the purpose of generating good will, high level massage; they were not for the conduct of substantive business, which would be left to the Secretary of State and the professional diplomats. Therefore, as I recall, the briefing memoranda and the books that came over in the first days of the New Frontier didn't have any meat in them; they didn't have any substance. This was to be found only in the background papers (all of which Kennedy read, by the way, and asked for more) but even there they didn't get into the nuts and bolts of what the problems really were.

In effect, it almost seemed to me that the bureaucracy didn't trust the President to discuss concrete items of military and economic assistance or border disputes or things like that because of the risk (I don't offer this criticism in a demeaning way). The bureaucrats were really worried that when the President of the United States said something substantive, it had the aura of a commitment and that these foreigners would go back and say, for example, that the President "sympathized with our position on Kashmir" and that "we had a case" and then we would spend the next two or three years digging out of it. But on very few occasions did I ever see Kennedy overdo it. I cannot recall any incident of the President overcommitting us or overextending in a way that the Department so obviously worried about.

On the other hand, I do recall that on more than one occasion he would talk about items of intelligence sensitivity. He would frequently bring grimaces to the faces of our diplomats by talking quite frankly about something that was slugged Secret, U.S. eyes only, etc. It is, of course, the prerogative of the President to decide what is sensitive and what isn't, and I always found these instances more amusing than dangerous. Frequently, it was my impression--I can't recall any specific instances now--that the President was deliberately revealing an item of sensitive information to impress the visitor with the point he wished to make--and the point generally seemed to be far more important than the intelligence. Security is not an end in itself; security is merely a means of advancing policy, and the President had a better sense of when to use it and when not to than anyone else.

What I would call the fourth aspect of the President's intellectual equipment for the conduct of foreign policy in this particular area was his willingness to take an unpopular course because he knew it was not domestically sensitive. Here you get on to something in which I don't pretend to any particular qualifications, but fortunately in the field of Middle East policy we did not have any great issues which became the subject of popular debate. Now the Arab-Israeli issue invariably comes fairly close to that. One of the really shrewd things about the President's conduct of our Arab-Israeli policy was that it never got to the point of ever

becoming a really great debate. Maybe it would have in 1964 because this was an election year and the year of the Jordan waters, etc. So in part I would attribute this to circumstance. But in very large measure the President had a very shrewd appreciation that the American electorate just isn't terribly worried about issues like West New Guinea, even about the Kashmir problem, or about Yemen and things like that. Thus he felt a real freedom to endure the degree of press criticism (more often abroad than in the United States press and radio) which was inevitable in a shift to a more flexible policy of the sort he was trying to carry out.