

Herve Alphanth Oral History Interview - 10/14/1964
Administrative Information

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Interviewer: Adalbert de Segonzac
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Biographical Note

Alphanth, French Ambassador to the United States, discusses his role as French Ambassador, his impressions of President Kennedy, and the President's relationship with Charles de Gaulle and France in regards to foreign policy issues, among other issues.

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French Ambassador
to the United States

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Gift of Personal Statement
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HERVE ALPHAND

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Oral History Interview

With

HERVE ALPHAND

October 14, 1964

?

by Adalbert de Segonzac

For the John F. Kennedy Library

Mr. Adalbert de Segonzac: This is a recording of Mr. Herve Alphan, Ambassador to the United States. Interview made by Mr. Adalbert de Segonzac.

SEGONZAC: Mr. Ambassador, you knew President Kennedy very well. I wonder what sort of memory you have of the first encounter--the first meeting--you had with the President when he was still a Senator.

ALPHAND: I think the first meeting took place at the end of 1956 or maybe the beginning of 1957. I remember that it was at the end of the joint meeting of the Senate and the House, and I was about to leave when I saw a young man talking to a congressman I knew--Representative Flood of Pennsylvania [Daniel John Flood], who wore a long black mustache such as the French used to have at the beginning of the century, and jokingly this young man said to Congressman Flood, "But I recognized you--you are the French Ambassador." In fact, it was Senator Kennedy who jokingly said that to Representative Flood. I introduced myself to prove that the present French Ambassador had not an Adolphe Menjou mustache. That is my recollection of my first meeting with Senator Kennedy. We laughed together and from the beginning we became friends.

SEGONZAC: During his tenure as Senator, there were moments of difficulty between the Senator and France. For example, over Algeria when he made the

speech on the Algerian question, which was badly received in France. I am sure that on this occasion and later on you must have had other meetings with him?

ALPHAND: Yes, it is true. That's when he was Senator. I met him at various dinners and parties and especially, as you mentioned, after the speech he made in Algeria in July 1957.

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You remember in this speech he suggested that the solution of independence for Algeria should be settled and implemented through the intermediary of NATO, or the United Nations, or even the good offices of Tunisia or Morocco. This speech had then a tremendous impact on the French public opinion. I asked Senator Kennedy if he would lunch with me at the French Embassy to have a frank talk about his views on Algeria. I did not oppose the substance of his speech--I mean the idea of giving independence to Algeria--but I told him that the method suggested was not, in our view, appropriate. It was up to France really, and to France alone, to decide about when and how to give independence to Algeria. It was a very difficult problem involving risks, very serious risks, of civil war in France itself at a time when we had a series of very weak French governments. The solution could not be imposed, in our view, from outside. I said frankly to him that the method suggested could be very harmful to French-United States relations in trying to press us and to over-simplify tale difficulties. His answer was very clear. He said that maybe I was right and, in fact, he didn't, after that, make any reference to his speech and to the idea and to the method it suggested, except in two brief occasions later. Actually, France did what Senator Kennedy had suggested in his speech. But France did it only, thanks to the strong leadership of General de Gaulle [Charles de Gaulle] and without civil war. Very often President Kennedy told me afterwards that he approved of the French policy of self-determination for Algeria and also of the method that has been used by General de Gaulle. He said to me that the United States didn't want to interfere in any way with this process. Maybe this attitude which was, in my view, a very wise one was, to a certain extent, the result of the talk we had had together at that time.

SEGONZAC: Mr. Ambassador, then through further years you still saw him often as President. What would be interesting, I think, for us would be at this stage to know--what was your first contact with him once Mr. Kennedy became President of the United States.

ALPHAND: I have a very vivid memory of this first contact. He asked me to meet him at the White House. It was on the 10th of February 1961--a few days after his inauguration--and his first words were to express the hope of a very close relationship with France. He told me, "You are the first Ambassador that I am calling to visit me in the White House. The subjects of our conversation were more or less those that we could discuss today. I remember that the first one was Laos. I stressed the necessity for the restoration of peace in Laos. I said to him that France was in favor of

the establishment of a tripartite neutral government under Prince Souvanna Phouma. Mr. Kennedy

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at the time was hesitating. The policy of the precedent administration was not at all the same as the one we were advocating. The previous policy was a policy of assistance to the right wing represented by Phoumi, but I remember that a few weeks later--exactly on the 26th of March 1961--I had to deliver to the President a message from General de Gaulle on the subject. The President asked me to join him at the Andrews airport--he had just had a meeting with Mr. Macmillan [Maurice Harold Macmillan] in Florida, and we discussed the matter in the car coming from Andrews airport to Washington. And then he was convinced--he told me that he didn't want to see the United States involved in a war in the jungles of Laos or Indo-China as a whole. He was convinced and he thought the best possible solution for the time being, was really to have this tripartite government--this neutral government--under the head of Souvanna Phouma. I think it was the beginning of the negotiation's which took place in Geneva, leading to the Accord that was signed about Laos.

Another subject that we discussed this very day of our first meeting was the Congo. I said to him that France was very skeptical about the possibilities of the UN action in the Congo, that General de Gaulle was in favor of a concerted effort of the Western powers to help the Congo unify its government and its army--its military forces. I must admit that on that day Mr. Kennedy was not in favor of such a solution; he was, on the contrary, willing to continue the efforts of the United Nations in the Congo.

We spoke also of a very important--probably even more important subject--which was the tripartite cooperation: I mean the cooperation between France, the United States and the United Kingdom, to coordinate their policies, their diplomatic actions, and their strategy. I explained to him that it had been exposed in a memorandum addressed in September 1958 by the French Government to the American Government: Our view was that these three countries, because they possess in very different degrees some kind of atomic power, and also because they have by tradition, by history a sort of World interest everywhere--these three countries had really to try to coordinate their actions. We didn't want to create what was called by the press a "directorate"--a body that would impose their will to others--it was not at all our view--we accepted also that on any subject the other interested countries should be brought in our discussions. Although Mr. Kennedy was not entirely negative, he couldn't give me any immediate answer to the question. A new conversation took place on this very subject in June 1961 between President Kennedy and General de Gaulle and then great

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hopes were raised at the time--that this problem of tripartite cooperation could be solved. Unfortunately these hopes never materialized. We had, of course, a few meetings between the Secretary of State, the British Ambassador and myself to try to organize the cooperation between the three main powers of the West but, in fact, what President de

Gaule proposed--real organization of the diplomatic and strategic actions of these three powers--unfortunately in my view, never materialized.

The same day, Mr. Kennedy talked to me about Africa. He said that he recognized the immense progress made in the former French colonies, thanks to the policy of decolonization; that he had full confidence in the great plan for emancipation and free cooperation with the former colonial power, and that he wanted to avoid creating any new centers of Cold War in Africa. He, therefore, was entirely confident of the action of France in these former French territories. He wanted also to coordinate with us the help given by the United States to former French colonies and said to me that American assistance will be just in addition to what France, by free agreements, was ready to do to help these countries. I think this has been the constant policy of his Administration and still is the policy of the US Administration.

To conclude about this first meeting, I think that I would say that I found it extremely frank, and I thought that the President was extremely easy to talk with. Of course, there were some oppositions of views on certain subjects, but it was very clear that we had a common will to make our alliance strong. I must add that it was very easy to see him, to talk to him. Actually, at the end of the conversation he told me, "When you want to see me, just call Mr. O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] or call me directly on the phone." After that, I must say that I saw him more than twenty times for long and sometimes difficult discussions in the White House or at Palm Beach or Glen Ora and other places.

SEGONZAC: It would be interesting, Mr. Ambassador, at this stage, for you to say how you could define the person who was Mr. Kennedy--what sort of man was he--how did he feel--what his reactions were like--how did he impress you.

ALPHAND: It would be difficult to make a brief summary of the extraordinary qualities of President Kennedy. President Kennedy had so many. It would be difficult to decide what was

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his major one and give a complete picture. If I may use an image, I would say that he was born under the Zodiac sign of Gemini at the end of the month of May. If you believe in astrology, the Gemini type enjoys qualities which are entirely contradictory. For instance, John Kennedy could be at the same time extremely gay and even teasing and yet very serious. He could at the same moment display resolution and reservation as he did during the Cuban Crisis of October 1962. He was a very patient man and sometime he could be quick-tempered. He was very simple and very complex at the same time.

In our conversations, I always found him ready listen, to try to understand my point of view. He had an enormous memory of facts, of figures, of history, he had complete knowledge of the problems he had to discuss, he had a will to achieve for his country and for the world a great design, to be, in other words, a great President. He had a clear vision of the future and above all a desire to avoid war, to talk not only with his

friends but with his enemies, but with no sign of what is called “appeasement.” And I think all these qualities combined were certainly the ingredients of greatness.

SEGONZAC: Mr. Ambassador, of course, problems of France were raised between you--the relations between France and the United States--were raised many times between you and President Kennedy. What would you say was the feeling of President Kennedy towards France--towards General de Gaulle?

ALPHAND: He thought that harmonious relations between US and France were a fundamental element of world equilibrium. He knew France as a boy. He came to France for his holidays--the south of France--and he knew France also through his wife--Jacqueline made many, many trips to Paris. I know that Jacqueline helped him very much to understand France. She loves France--she has French blood--she speaks our language very well and she asked him to read the memoirs of General de Gaulle. I think her influence was extremely efficient as far as Franco-American relations were concerned.

President Kennedy had a great admiration for General de Gaulle, and this was a reciprocal feeling. The relations were extremely good when he visited him in Paris in May 1961. As I said, great hopes of understanding were raised at the time and after that; there was an extremely important exchange of letters, of messages of all sorts between our two presidents. Of course, we had differences of opinion

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on many subjects, but there was no difference of principle between us and this we saw especially in the time of great crises; for instance, the time of the Cuban Crisis and the time of the Berlin Crisis when General de Gaulle and the French people as a whole were entirely on the side of the American policy and the decisions taken by the President of the United States. I think Mr. Kennedy realized what a strong ally was France in time of big crises.

SEGONZAC: Mr. Ambassador, you have talked of the first meeting with the President and what were the subjects raised. During the nearly three years you had occasions to meet him you raised many subjects. Could you give us more details of what type of subjects you talked about with him and can you expand a little bit on those subjects. How was he reacting to what you were saying--what was he saying to you?

ALPHAND: I think our main subject of discussion was certainly what was called in the press--although he never used the expression himself--his “great design”--about the organization of the Western world--that means a unified Europe including Great Britain--coupled with an Atlantic association or “partnership,” as he said, between this unified Europe and the United States. Of course, from the beginning, I said to him in our conversation that we thought that Great Britain was not ready, for obvious reasons, to be a part of a united Europe and especially of the Common Market, on

account of her ties with the Commonwealth, and the EFTA countries, and also of her special relationship with the United States. But on the other hand, we were ready to continue to unify Europe in the framework of the six and to have the best possible relations between this Europe, Great Britain and the United States especially in the trade field. We were ready to discuss what was called the Kennedy Round--if concessions were balanced and non-discriminatory, and I think it was exactly what he had in mind. All this appeared, I think, clearly in the press conference made by General de Gaulle on the 14th of January, 1963, and I must admit that this press conference created between us a certain coolness for a certain time.

We discussed also President Kennedy's offer to France to participate together with Great Britain in the Nassau agreement. I remember quite well our conversation on this subject on his yacht, the *Honey Fitz*, at Palm Beach on the 29th of December 1962. In fact, President Kennedy then told me he was ready to offer France the same conditions that were accepted

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by Great Britain, that the United States would provide us with Polaris missiles without atomic warheads--that we would have therefore to build ourselves the warheads and the submarines--the atomic submarines--second, that these forces should be integrated units put at the disposal of NATO except if we considered that some supreme national interest would be at stake and in that case we could decide to use ourself--to defend this interest--our independent atomic force. I must say that from the beginning in this meeting in Palm Beach I gave him no illusion about the French reaction. I told him that I thought that we were not able, technically and financially, to build nuclear warheads that would be adaptable to Polaris missiles--American Polaris missiles--nor the submarines that could carry these missiles. I stressed that we wanted to have an independent nuclear force--that we could not and would not depend on anybody for the production of our weapons but, of course, we were ready to study with him--with the United States and Great Britain--the way, when the time would come, to coordinate our very modest atomic force with the American and the British forces in case of a common danger. I think that the President understood me at the time and later he said to our Prime Minister and to myself that he accepted the existence of the French atomic force as a sort of fait accompli. He didn't like it but he accepted it. Of course, that meant that France was not in a position to adhere to the atomic test ban treaty--the Moscow treaty: we were not able to join this agreement on partial ban of atomic test in the atmosphere because we still had to make a few of these atomic tests to build our atomic force. Mr. Kennedy, I think, accepted this position and he also understood that we were not in favor of proliferation of nuclear weapons--that, in particular, we were not ready to give to anybody--for instance, the Germans--what we had done in this field.

Another subject of constant discussion was Berlin and this was connected with the general attitude of the West vis-a-vis Soviet Russia. On Berlin we were in fundamental agreement. We were in agreement to defend our rights to be present in Berlin and of free access to the city of Berlin and not to make any concession on these rights. But President Kennedy was very anxious to talk with the Russians about the possibility of improving

the present situation. I was instructed to explain to him our position on this, which was a position of tactics. We thought in the present state of tension between the East and the West, it was not good to take the initiative of talking with the Russians because that could

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appear to them as a sign of weakness. We knew very well that it was not weakness from his side--from the United States side--that this country would remain firm in its commitments, but Moscow could believe that the West might grant certain concessions that, in fact, the United States and ourselves were absolutely not ready to make. That might create, therefore, grave miscalculations on the part of the Soviets. In fact, we had to suffer many crises in Berlin and the firm attitude of the Western powers was such that the status quo was kept. But I am not sure that the Russians didn't make these miscalculations about our will to resist and that it might not have been the source of what they tried to do, with no success at all, in Cuba, for instance. Very soon, of course, they saw that it was a mistake, that President Kennedy was resolute and not ready to accept any concession either on the European front or on the Caribbean front. Such were the main subjects of our discussions.

SEGONZAC: Mr. Ambassador, there are now divergences of views between France and the United States over Indo-China and Vietnam. Could you tell us if you talked about this with the President, which you certainly did, and when you started talking about it with him, which is important?

ALPHAND: It was in June of 1961 in Paris. At that time President Kennedy was visiting France and had a long thorough talk with General de Gaulle. General de Gaulle told him that in his view the right policy for Southeast Asia and especially for Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, was to find a political solution and by that he meant a solution of a neutral status, independent from the West and from the Chinese or the Russians. President Kennedy disagreed entirely with the views expressed by General de Gaulle. He said that he had a fear of Communist contamination of the entire Southeast Asian region and that the United States had to stay there. General de Gaulle said then that for the time being he would not express publicly his position, but would reserve his right to support publicly one day the policy of neutrality for Southeast Asia. In fact, that was not done until August 1963. But I wanted to stress that this view of France about the possible solution of Southeast Asian problems was put to the President of the United States in the middle of 1961.

SEGONZAC: Were the views of France toward China then put in the same way in front of President Kennedy much earlier than they officially came out?

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ALPHAND: No. In fact, we didn't talk to him at length about China. He talked only once about China--I remember it was at the White House after a charming

dinner--in January 1963, with Andre Malraux, our Minister of State for Cultural Affairs. The President expressed the view that the Chinese question was much more important than our minor differences inside the Western world. At that time he already feared that the first atomic explosion--I would say device of China should occur in 1964 or 1965. And then, he said, "What will we do then?" He stressed that there were two different opinions in the United States--some were in favor of patience and even said that the USSR might then join the NATO, that after all, the fact to explode a bomb would not mean for a long time that China would become a real danger. The other school of thought was favoring immediate action--if not, they say, there will be a danger of seeing China becoming a nuclear power by 1970. President Kennedy didn't give his own views about these two possibilities. I remember that Mr. Malraux said that our information was a little different from the one the United States had--that he didn't fear a first atomic blast by China for a certain number of years. Also he stressed the point that to make a first atomic explosion would not mean that China should be an atomic power for a long time. As far as I remember, it is the only occasion when we discussed China We didn't even discuss, for instance, the recognition of China by France.

SEGONZAC: France has shown recently interest in Latin America. This is also a subject which I am certain was discussed between the President and yourself all through those years.

ALPHAND: Certainly. And also during that conference between General de Gaulle and President Kennedy in June 1961, this problem was raised by the President of the United States himself. He said to the General that the traditional ties between France and Latin America were very useful for the United States and that he would be very happy to see French influence increase in Latin America so as to reinforce their links with Europe as a whole. General de Gaulle recognized, of course, the primacy of the United States in matter of matter of trade, of defense, etc.--but he said that it would be extremely important that Europe should also do something. We would have to coordinate our efforts inside Europe, to help the Latin American countries, so that what we would do would be to complement the major program of assistance by the United States. Very often

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we spoke with your President of this conversation later, and I am sure that his suggestion was in the mind of the President of the French Republic when he went to Mexico, for instance, and later visited ten South American countries.

SEGONZAC: Mr. Ambassador, could you tell us your impressions and what was talked about in your very last meeting with the President?

ALPHAND: My last official conversation with the President was on the 7th of October 1963, with our Foreign Minister, Mr. Couve de Murville. I must say, that

all subjects affecting Franco-American relations were discussed at length in the course of this conversation: the organization of Europe and the links with the United States; the Franco-German cooperation treaty that President Kennedy approved entirely--because, said he, "American boys went twice to Europe on account of German aggressions and it was a fundamental thing to see, a new friendship established between France and Germany." We discussed the future of NATO, and on this occasion Mr. Couve de Murville told him that the assistance of the alliance was not under discussion, that the alliance was indispensable, but that we might have to discuss later the "structure" of the alliance, because circumstances are completely different now from what they were when NATO was born. We discussed the general idea of "detente," of relaxation of tension between East and West; we discussed, of course, the Kennedy Round and repeated that France was in favor of reducing our tariff if that could be done in a harmonious way so as to have reciprocal concessions; we discussed also, because it was very much in the mind of the President at the time, the position of the dollar and the US balance of payments.

I remember quite well what was the conclusion of President Kennedy after our long talk. He said, "After all, there is a real harmony between our two countries--much greater than it appears when you read the press"--and he said to Mr. Couve de Murville, "I will tell that in my speeches."--speeches that unfortunately he had no occasion to deliver. That was my last, I would say, "official" conversation with the President.

Then I remember my last personal meeting with him--it was on the 23rd of October 1963, therefore less than a month before the tragic event of Dallas. It was at a small dinner at the White House. We were eight altogether--it was a very gay dinner. I remember Franklin Roosevelt was there and other friends, and after dinner the President told me with a smile,

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"Don't you think that General de Gaulle needs to keep an atmosphere of some tension between France and the United States to pursue his own policy of independence?" "Certainly not, Mr. President," I said, "The key words of French policy were 'alliance' and 'independence,' because a free and responsible ally is much more useful, even if it is more difficult, than an obedient servant or an obedient protégé." The President agreed and thought that our differences were more on methods and tactics than on substance. He spoke very highly of General de Gaulle and wanted to see him next February. That had not been completely agreed upon, but he thought of places where he could meet him, he thought of Hyannis Port as a sort of American "Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises."

To conclude our conversation today, my dear Adalbert, I would say that very often I heard General de Gaulle say, "I understand President Kennedy's stand. If I were in his position, I would act like him." And he was referring specifically to the atomic policy of the United States. And, likewise, very often President Kennedy used to tell me, "If I were the President of the French Republic, I should probably act like General de Gaulle." I hope that these two remarks of our great leaders will help French and American opinions to better understand our positions, sometimes different. The differences are real, they are not dramatic, and it was the will of President Kennedy to try

to reduce them to a minimum and to emphasize the fundamental agreement existing on the really vital issues.

SEGONZAC: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]

Herve Alphand Oral History Interview
Name List

Flood	Flood, Daniel John
de Gaulle	de Gaulle, Charles
Phouma	Souvanna Phouma, Prince
Macmillan	Macmillan, Maurice Harold
O'Donnell	O'Donnell, Kenneth P.
Malraux	Malraux, Andre
Murville	Couve de Murville, Maurice
Menjou	Menjou, Adolph
Jacqueline	Kennedy Onassis, Jacqueline
Roosevelt	Roosevelt, Franklin D.