

David Ben-Gurion, Oral History Interview – 7/16/1965
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Biographical Note

Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel from 1955 to 1963, discusses the interactions of Russia and China and speculates on the possibility that John F. Kennedy (JFK) would have been able to diffuse tensions between the United States and those nations, JFK's youthfulness, and the Peace Corps, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

David Ben-Gurion

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David Ben-Gurion

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Oral History Interview

with

David Ben-Gurion

July 16, 1965
Tel Aviv, Israel

By E. A. Bayne

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BAYNE: Mr. Ben-Gurion, I believe your first visit with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] was in 1961 as president...

BEN-GURION: Yes, but I met him before.

BAYNE: ...although you may have met him before.

BEN-GURION: I met him two or three times. The first time here. He came over here, I think, about '52 or '53. I still have the picture here of us together. I sent it to his family. But from that I have no memory, only the picture.

Then, the second time was before he was nominated at election year. I was there in Washington, I think, about July or August. It was on a Saturday morning. I was staying with a friend of mine who was very religious—this is why I went to him because he couldn't come to me—Dr.... He was then elected as chief rabbi in England, but he's still here. Then, he (Kennedy) was a senator. This was before the nomination. When he came in, I was amazed at such a young boy. He was already about forty, but he looked twenty-five. I couldn't imagine that such a young boy would be nominated for the presidency. Really, I didn't take it very seriously because it was all right; it was a nice visit; it was all right. I don't remember what we talked about; we had a long talk about all kinds of

things. But I couldn't believe that that young boy—he looked to me as a young boy—would be nominated. This was my first meeting.

Then, the second time was when he was already President. It was, I think, the end of May, 1961. It was just a day before he left for Europe. He went to meet Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev].

BAYNE: Oh, yes.

BEN-GURION: It was in New York in a hotel. I don't remember which hotel. Our Ambassador, Mr. Harman [Avraham Harman], he called Mr.

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Talbot [Phillips Talbot] from the State Department and one of the President's secretaries too, Myer Feldman. Then, we discussed our position, armaments, and security in the Middle East. I have all the details of our talk, but I haven't got it here. I'm sorry.

BAYNE: I remember I was here at that time that you went back. That was May, 1961. I recall that there were several things preliminary to the visit. One was that the Department of State thought that he had been too soon in office and that your coming might make some difficulties in the State Department's effort to create an image between the Arabs and the Israelis. You got in touch, I believe, through Mr. Feldman with the President directly and arranged this meeting in New York. As I recall, your thinking at that time—because I interviewed you then—was that you had an election coming up in August and you didn't want to make a visit to Mr. Kennedy look as though you were seeking some assistance from Mr. Kennedy by making the visit. Hence, you wanted to have an early visit with him.

There was one other question that I would like to ask—whether you felt that you got any real satisfaction from the interview. Not long before that, the Americans had made a fuss about the fact that the reactor in Demona had been discovered and that somehow this had been a secret project. What you wanted to do was to give some assurances, I believe, when you went to see President Kennedy that, as a new President, that he would know that the relationship was not to be marred by this kind of misunderstanding.

BEN-GURION: It is quite possible that you are talking about that. But the worry was about when Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] was President and he wanted to send somebody to have a look at it. That was arranged all right. Maybe, we discussed that too, but I don't remember. It's a pity that I don't know. I was in three weeks ago.

BAYNE: That's what the papers say.

BEN-GURION: Yes. Then, I had a long talk—because our Ambassador took notes

while we were talking.

BAYNE: Yes. So I imagine...

BEN-GURION: Can I tell you something that is not to be published, which is only to be used for the Archives?

BAYNE: This is it.

BEN-GURION: You see, while we were talking he stood up and took me to a corner far away from the people there. There was Mr. Talbot, our Ambassador, and (Kennedy's) secretary, Mr. Feldman. He took me away from them and said, "I was elected by the Jews." Later, I understood this is usual in America. He said to me, "You know I was elected by the Jews. I have to do something for them." I was shocked. I'm a foreigner; I represent a small state. I didn't come to him as a Jew, as a

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voter. And he told me, "You know, I was elected by the Jews of New York. I will do something for you." I was a little shocked when he said it to me. Then we went back and continued our conversation. This I remember because I was thoroughly impressed, but later I understood that this is usual and in keeping with American politics.

BAYNE: I see. He wouldn't have wanted that, perhaps, an open admission of history, but to international relations...

BEN-GURION: Yes. He took me into a corner at a far away table because we were sitting all together here, and took me over—something like that.
[Laughter]

BAYNE: Did you feel.... At that time you had certain views about certainly what General Eisenhower...

BEN-GURION: Then, I read a good deal about him. I read a collection of his speeches. I changed my view; I saw him while he was still a young man, not as young as he seemed to me when he came in. But I read his book. I believe it is *Profiles in Courage*.

BAYNE: That's right

BEN-GURION: And I saw that he was specially impressed by people, courageous people. I felt that he himself was a man of great courage. That's

what I felt then about him. That was one thing outstanding. Then, we discussed the whole—because I started there with Eisenhower. I discussed it with his Secretary of State, Herter [Christian A. Herter].

BAYNE: Christian Herter.

BEN-GURION: Yes. We discussed it. I had to leave. I asked him, “Can I leave on the assumption that he will get it?” His reply was, “It’s a fair assumption.” I knew a great deal about him; I knew that he was a very honest man. If he said that it’s a fair assumption, I knew that that was almost a promise. Then, I knew he would look at it, but very shortly after that a new President was elected, and I think that I discussed it again with President Kennedy.

BAYNE: Well, the agreement didn’t come until 1962.

BEN-GURION: The final agreement. Yes. The final agreement, yes.

BAYNE: I remember actually the night when President Kennedy was nominated. I just happened to be with you. I believe we were in the Sheraton Hotel. And Harry Golden, Mamie Shellette and you, Mrs. Ben-Gurion [Paula Ben-Gurion], and I just happened to be there. When the news came in that he had been nominated, your face lit up like a Christmas tree. [Laughter] Excuse the figure of speech. You went on at some length with me at that time in talking about the whole appeal of youth, and you felt

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that his youthfulness, which you have already commented upon, would be a kind of beacon for people all over the country, including in Israel.

BEN-GURION: That’s an impression which I remember well because it deeply impressed me that he was so young. Then I saw that he was nominated because I was surprised that such a young man would be nominated. On the same day I also met Senator Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. Immediately after I talked with Kennedy, I met Senator Johnson. It was in the house of Jewish friends. He looked to me more solid; he was then about fifty, I believe, or more, something; like that.

BAYNE: Yes. Do you feel that this youthful image of Kennedy, even though his administration was very short, did result in some real attention to you?

BEN-GURION: No doubt, I’ve no doubt. I remember the day. It was 7 p.m. when I turned on my radio in the middle of the program and I heard that

they were taking him to the hospital. I didn't know what had happened. We had to wait two hours. It was 7 p.m. here; it was 12 there. At 9 p.m. I wondered again, "Why did they take him to the hospital?" Then I knew already that he was dead. It was one of the greatest shocks that I ever had in my life. And for many days I couldn't come to myself. I knew from reading papers from England, even from Russia, that this was—as far as I can remember in my lifetime—the first time that it was the universal mood. It was sincere, not merely political or something like that. The people were impressed with the new generation which had arisen in America, which takes a deep interest in world affairs and peace—a new approach to things. And, really, the entire world was numbed. I, for many days, couldn't come to myself. I was so deeply moved by that... Such a promising young President. Really, he represented for the whole world their leader. I know it was our country—but not only here—I knew the same thing that all Europe thought. It was amazing. And even in Russia, it was sincere and not just political.

BAYNE: You think that this was as much based upon youth, the appeal

BEN-GURION: It was also the new approach to peace. You felt his youth, courage, and intellectual approach. You saw America not as a different thing, but as a part of the whole. Unless the entire world will be in peace and prosperous, it must affect America. You felt that he is a part of humanity because America for many, many years was apart from Europe until World War I and World War II. But even after World War I Wilson [Woodrow Wilson] was defeated. He wanted to build the League of Nations and the Senate and the people were against him. Even World War II still at the beginning there was the law of neutrality, and Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] had to very wisely overcome that neutrality. He made a deal with England; it wasn't a deal really. He gave them fifty...

BAYNE: Destroyers.

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BEN-GURION: ...Destroyers, for something which was not a deal, to overcome the law of neutrality. Until then, America was not a part of the entire world. But with Kennedy, we felt that he realized that now every country is interdependent on others; you cannot live by yourself. You cannot feel safe yourself unless the entire world is safe and there is peace everywhere. America is a part of the world, not a separate thing. That was, I think, the feeling which affected the entire human race while they were mourning the President.

BAYNE: You knew President Roosevelt?

BEN-GURION: Personally, no. I didn't.

BAYNE: But you know, of course, President Truman [Harry S. Truman] very well.

BEN-GURION: Right.

BAYNE: Yes. And you knew President Eisenhower; you'd seen him a number of times.

BEN-GURION: But from what you said, he's known to me better than I know him. [Laughter] I don't know how he knew me. But I have met him. Weizmann [Chaim Weizmann] and I were there; Dr. Weizmann was there. He was the President. I told him it was his business to see the President.

BAYNE: Oh, yes. That's right. Of the Presidents that you have known, how would you rank President Kennedy from an historical point of view?

BEN-GURION: It's difficult to say what would have happened. I will tell you what I expected from him, which I still consider one of the greatest world problems. I was almost certain that if Kennedy were reelected, he would change American policy toward China. I couldn't imagine that Kennedy with his intellect, with his world view, didn't realize the place China is going to take in the world now. Also, I knew from his views that when he was reelected, he would change the policy. First of all, China has seven hundred million people. You cannot ignore that and say that because Chiang Kai-shek represents about one million Chinese (there are about eleven million people in Formosa, but only one million Chinese), he represents the Chinese, and not see the difference. Not only for that, but he also realized that China now is not the China it was in the nineteenth century. They are making progress. They are advanced in science and technology. It will take them not more than it took Japan to become equal to America; perhaps it is true already.

I was certain that he would correct that mistake which had been made because this is, perhaps, the biggest world problem now. You see, even Eisenhower and Truman realized that they must come nearer to Russia. Russia also began to realize after Stalin [Joseph Stalin] that she cannot regard those non-Communist countries as enemies. It's nonsense and they would not conquer them.

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BAYNE: Apropos of this, the Shah of Persia [Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi] felt that Kennedy's greatest contribution as a President to world peace had been that he made co-existence with Russia acceptable. For small nations, this was of tremendous importance. Would you agree with this?

BEN-GURION: Absolutely, absolutely.

BAYNE: That this was his greatest contribution?

BEN-GURION: But, he also realized that Russia is afraid of China because the quarrel between China and Russia is not merely ideological, it is also practical. It is not an ideological quarrel. It's a double quarrel. One is competition; who will be the leader of Asia. Asia, after all, is more than half of humanity. But there is another root to that quarrel. The Russians took away some 7-800,000 square miles from China. The Chinese, whether they are Communist or not, are Chinese first, and they are patriots. They want to get it back from the Russians, and the Russians know it and are afraid of them. Now, when China is buffeted by America, America is, of course, the main enemy. I remember their sending me their weekly, *Peking Review*. That bitterness with which they speak about America—I can't believe that they don't know that they are exaggerating about it by great deal. This is one way to frighten Russia; not to come too near to Russia. I was sure that Kennedy realized that in order to come near to Russia and in order to have not only a slug at peaceful co-existence, but true world co-existence and cooperation, they must change their policy with China. Russia should not be afraid of China. Russia is terribly afraid of China not only in their movements. But, they must come nearer to the world not only to the States, but also to Europe. Only recently a report was published by a young economist, a Rumanian. His name is.... I forgot his name. I was amazed at their love of speaking in public about the backwardness of Russian economy. He said that there is a growing unemployment, that not only is their agriculture inferior, but also their industry—not only to America but even to Europe. They must learn from Europe. But it was not published. One of the English people got it. It was published recently in the *New Statesman*, last week.

BAYNE: Yes. I saw it.

BEN-GURION: Yes. You saw it. You have read it? President Kennedy lived much with international problems. This is the difference, perhaps, to Johnson; he lives more with domestic problems. World problems were, for Kennedy, American problems. And living with the world problems, he realized that to come really nearer to Russia there must be changes made in the Chinese policy. I was certain that as soon as he was reelected, he would change his policy.

BAYNE: The Chinese policy.

BEN-GURION: The Chinese policy.

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BAYNE: Yes.

BEN-GURION: This is an example for Russia. Russia is afraid that they will be accused by the Chinese that their losing their ____ and so on, because they have other problems. But if China wouldn't be so bitterly hostile to America, then they would not attack Russia so much for cooperating,

for co-existence. They themselves would want coexistence because they are very practical people.

BAYNE: Very. I spent four years there.

BEN-GURION: Oh, you've been to China. Well, I need not tell you about China. You would know more than I do.

BAYNE: I worked with T.V. Soong and the Generalissimo for four years as an adviser.

BEN-GURION: When was this?

BAYNE: It was from 1945 to 1948.

BEN-GURION: Before the Communist revolution?

BAYNE: Yes. Yes. This.... The Chinese, the Chinese.

BEN-GURION: I know.... Do you speak Chinese?

BAYNE: I used to.

BEN-GURION: And they have a good historical memory. They don't forget things.

BAYNE: And what you were describing as being their policy now was to some extent then.

BEN-GURION: America was the only big country in the nineteenth century which did nothing against China as some European countries did. On the contrary, America helped China even in the war. General Marshall [George C. Marshall] was there to bring together Chiang Kai-shek with the Communists. He was not against the Communists.

BAYNE: There are some special questions which have been suggested that we might talk about more specifically are upon relations during Kennedy's administration; specifically, relations between Israel and the United States. Do you feel that while Kennedy had an effect upon you as the leader of Israel, at this time he had an effect upon the people of Israel in some way? Did he give them more sense of security in the Arab situation? Were the speeches that he made and the kind of idealism that he put forward, internationally, a help? Could you...

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BEN-GURION: He tried to tell the whole truth. Eisenhower was also very friendly,

although he had trouble during the Sinai campaign. But apart from that...

BAYNE: That was more trouble with Mr. Hoover [Herbert C. Hoover] than it was with anybody else. Wasn't it? [Laughter]

BEN-GURION: Yes. So, it was nothing new in Kennedy's friendship, in his work, and also in his wish to bring about peace and to secure at least a status quo. It was a continuation of that feeling which we had with the American government. The same was with Eisenhower and the same was with Kennedy. In that respect, there was no change.

The change which I felt was a new and different type of American. It was not only youth. Eisenhower did not take a real deep interest in political questions at all. I remember that I had that talk with him. I was with him for two hours. The following day I met a commander in Europe—I forgot his name. And the following morning when he told me the whole talk, I said, “How do you know?” He said, “Yesterday evening he (Eisenhower) was playing cards. [Laughter] Eisenhower told me.” I cannot imagine President Kennedy sitting all evening and playing cards! This was the difference.

BAYNE: Yes.

BEN-GURION: He (Eisenhower) took very little interest. I knew that every morning they came in with a short report and told him what was going to happen. But he is a very nice person (Eisenhower), a lovely person.

In regard to Israel, it was nothing new with Kennedy because it was a continuation of the friendly policies of Eisenhower. Eisenhower was a sincere man; if he said something, he meant it. And so was Kennedy. The impression which I had was in world affairs. It's a new type; a new approach, a new American approach to world affairs. It is a part of the world. Their real deep interest was that the whole world should be involved there both economically and politically; should be able to live in peace, and more or less should be prosperous and better.

BAYNE: A sense of vision that overrode these problems in a sense even though they were a continuation of the kind of difficult discussion you had. In relation to the Middle East, specifically, did you find that you reached a better or more effective agreement with President Kennedy than previously? Or did you feel that this continuation of the general attitude toward the Middle East...

BEN-GURION: The general attitude in the Middle East was the same. It was that peace in the Middle East was good for both Israel and the Arabs. It was the same.

BAYNE: In this sense, a continuation.

BEN-GURION: Yes, it was a continuation.

BAYNE: If I remember, you had some ideas at this time in regard to, particularly, the idea of Russia and the United States somehow arriving at some kind of agreement.

BEN-GURION: Yes.

BAYNE: If this was not true, if no kind of co-existence specific to Middle East and Arab-Israel tension could be arrived at, then Israel would have a greater responsibility to defend itself than otherwise.

BEN-GURION: Yes.

BAYNE: Then, for this reason you felt that the United States.... You were asking the United States for assistance this case...

BEN-GURION: I know that he went.... I met him at the end of May. The following day he left for Vienna, I believe, and there he met Khrushchev. That meeting was not very successful.

BAYNE: No.

BEN-GURION: Kennedy was disappointed. Relations were not better. It changed only after the Cuban business. Really, that was a great day for President Kennedy.

BAYNE: Did you manage to ease his mind as far as Israel's atomic capacity was concerned?

BEN-GURION: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

BAYNE: Did you give him some assurances?

BEN-GURION: Oh, yes. [Laughter] I told him that we need atomic power for the desalinization of seawater. This is our great problem. This is the biggest economic problem that we have here. According to people in the know, they say it is cheap because everybody can desalinate seawater. But it is very expensive. In an economic way, it can be done only with atomic power. They told us not now, but that this can be achieved in the next six to eight years. This is why he wanted to help us.

BAYNE: When he was nominated, I know you were very happy about it,

but—even though you thought that he was very young—would there have been another candidate for you?

BEN-GURION: I, myself, in a sense, am a young man. [Laughter] When I

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became Minister of Defense, I decided that I would get young men as leaders of the army. I had seven chief of staff succeeding each other. The oldest man was forty years of age when he was nominated. They were all a success. I was glad I wasn't mistaken. Certainly, his youth played a certain role all these years. He was surrounded by intellectuals which was also very important. He realized that we are living now in an age of science and scientific progress. But the fact that he was young was a help to them because a man who has already his habits for many decades cannot realize that we are living in a changing world. An older man is living in the past, although I sometimes forget that I myself am not a young man.

BAYNE: You're looking very young.

BEN-GURION: But no, really, I cannot stand people who are living as though they were living thirty or forty years ago. It's a changing world; it's a different world. His view was felt in his understanding and in his approach to things and in his relationship to people.

BAYNE: When shortly after his inauguration the problem of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, the first Cuban crisis, came and this looked like a disaster for the United States, did you blame this on his youth, or did you feel that this was just the chances of international affairs?

BEN-GURION: No. International affairs. There are always two sides. It cannot do it. Khrushchev would say, "Go out and make war." Then, it would be disaster because it always depends on two sides. And this could have happened because a human being is after all, in a way, an irrational being. You cannot know exactly what he is going to do. And he was on the brink of complete disaster.

BAYNE: On the second one. On the missile crisis.

BEN-GURION: Yes. On the missiles.

BAYNE: Did you think that he was going to pull it off? That the Russians would really back down?

BEN-GURION: I myself thought that they would not do it, but you could never be

sure that...

BAYNE: You didn't think that it was going to come off.

BEN-GURION: It cannot be certain. It cannot be certain...

BAYNE: That's interesting. What about Kennedy's beginning of our present Vietnam situation, the fact that he acted, perhaps, a little slow in starting? Some people seemed to criticize him because he didn't act more quickly and put force in there. Other people

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thought that he should have withdrawn. What did you think about it—what he committed Johnson to, in effect?

BEN-GURION: I think that, perhaps, Vietnam was the worst thing that Johnson inherited—a very difficult problem. Here again you cannot know what China is going to do. Well, I hear they are going to send another troop; it'll bring it up to another 100,000. China can easily send 500,000 people. You can never tell how far they are ready to go.

BAYNE: Well, it becomes a question of resources.

BEN-GURION: Yes. They don't care if 100,000 soldiers will be killed.

BAYNE: You would.... Well, this is a comment on Johnson rather than Kennedy.

BEN-GURION: Yes, of course.

BAYNE: But you feel that our policy is fruitless in a sense?

BEN-GURION: If I tried to put myself in his shoes, I doubt if I would have said what I have. The trouble is that to live, America has to deal with a number of countries, not one nation. The same thing applies to Latin America. There are a number of corrupt governments, and you want to help, but the money goes into certain private pockets. I remember this. It was about twelve or thirteen years ago in Greece. Hundreds of millions were poured into Greece. I was there for two weeks. I spoke with people who knew that most of the money went into private pockets. The people remained as poor as they were. But that is not fair for America. When you have to deal with a government, you cannot have another government. You have to deal with them and their country. This same thing is in many Latin American countries. This is what happened in Vietnam. Every year they are changing the government. They are resigning...

BAYNE: Excuse me. I'm a little concerned about the recording. The magic eye doesn't seem to be picking you up. I wonder if we might have a couple of books under the microphone so that it will make it a little higher. There seems to be no shortage of books here. Good, wonderful, the Book of Job. This is a good one. [Laughter] Some of these questions that they suggested are being asked of everyone. They wanted to get some comparative thing.

The Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was hailed around the world as being a great achievement for Kennedy. Did you feel it was?

BEN-GURION: It was a great achievement. But again, there is China. China didn't sign it. The bulk of it is that all the atomic powers take part in it, but one of the greatest of them doesn't take part.

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BAYNE : Yes. So that it's.... But even as far as it went....

BEN-GURION: Always whenever any international question arises, we get to China. You cannot have disarmament without China. The Russians will not disarm without China. They are more afraid than Americans of China. They know that Russia took away great parts of China, The Chinese have a great memory; they didn't forget it; they have no reason to forget it. Russia is not going to disarm to leave China alone. Well, then, America cannot also disarm to leave Russia alone. That's the trouble. This is also with the test ban.

BAYNE: Some of the things that he did for Americans, the Peace Corps, for example. Do you feel—I don't know if Israel has, any Peace Corps in this sense. I remember that you were quite approving of the idea.

BEN-GURION: Thousands of Americans have responded to it.

BAYNE: You think its effect around the world has been good as you see the...

BEN-GURION: Oh, yes. I came back last week to my kibbutz. I saw there a number of very Nordic people. Thirty young men of Sweden came. They worked there for a month. Now, they are going another two weeks to work in another kibbutz. Someday they want to go to Africa, to work for Africans. Certainly, it has an effect.

BAYNE: Certainly in stimulating.... Of course, Israel had this sort of thing long since.

BEN-GURION: No, we had otherwise...

BAYNE: You came here yourself on a Peace Corps, didn't you? [Laughter]

BEN-GURION: No, without pioneering spirit, it couldn't be done.

BAYNE: Yes. I'd like to get back a little bit to...

BEN-GURION: This again shows that Kennedy realized that Americans are part of the world. Because the Peace Corps is not necessary for America; they don't need it in America. But they need it to help the new countries.

BAYNE: I remember your saying to me that if American Jewry could only produce ten thousand emigrants out of the six million Jews in America, then the problem, for example, of Levantinism would be turned—I think that you were talking about at that time.

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BEN-GURION: We have a very serious problem of lack of professors in the universities. The only hope is to get it from America.

BAYNE: This could be developed in some way. Actually, there are professors being provided under the Peace Corps.

BEN-GURION: We have some, yes. I had a guest that came to see me. The governor of Eastern Nigeria—very nice person, the nicest black man which I have seen from Africa. And he told me they have five universities there, and some of the universities, mostly their own people are professors, but not all of them.

BAYNE: Can I get back to Kennedy as a personality? When you met him before he was president and then when he was president, was there a difference in your reaction to him?

BEN-GURION: Oh yes.

BAYNE: There was.

BEN-GURION: But first of all, I knew already about him a great deal before I met him.

BAYNE: But when you saw him as a president, do you think this change was the aura of the presidency around him, that it made him a more dignified person, perhaps?

BEN-GURION: No, it was personality. No, you felt he's a great person. A new tide in American presidency. A young America—new America. It was a great sorrow at what happened. That one madman can do such a thing....

BAYNE: If you were writing history, and you do, how would you describe his greatest contribution as a president of the United States?

BEN-GURION: You mean to America or to the world?

BAYNE: No, to the world. Your own history as a world citizen.

BEN-GURION: Well, I would say these two ideas: the *idea* of a Peace Corps. I don't know how much they are doing. But I understand what he had in mind when he created the Peace Corps. He wanted that Americans—not only American money—to help the new people. He wanted the Americans, with their brains, with their idealism—that they should go to serve as an example—as some of our young people are doing in some countries, but we cannot do what America can do. This was a great thing. It's a pity he didn't live to see it. I'm sure if he would continue, he would put in more _____, because as I understand, President Johnson is more occupied with domestic problems than with world problems.

And the second thing was his new approach to world problems. I doubt whether any other president would do what he has done with Cuba. I mean the missiles. It requires a great risk. It requires courage. But believing that Russia will never dare to make an atomic war, he was right. _____ a certain risk. But after all, Khrushchev or whoever it is there may not be so rationalistic like him. They may send a bomb, then America would have to send one.

BAYNE: This kind of "iffy" game is not very productive, but do you feel that if Kennedy had been president in 1956 there would have been a better understanding of what you were trying to do?

BEN-GURION: There would be a better understanding because I am sure he would change the position of China. That's the key to all world problems. You can never forget that there exists such a big nation. An old civilization with great ambitions—a degree, justified ambitions. Without them you cannot do it; you can't ignore them. And he would not—that tragedy would not have happened. The position would be different. I'm sure he would change that.

BAYNE: But you think there would have...

BEN-GURION: And then relations with Russia would be different.

BAYNE: But if there had been Chinese recognition and Chinese

participation...

BEN-GURION: Then Russia wouldn't be so much afraid. And China also would be much nearer to America than she is now. Because all bitterness is against America. What they are writing is terrible things about America. Not a single word which is true. But I understand why they are so bitter. And I think this would have changed. Then the international situation would be much better.

BAYNE: And 1956 would not have been necessary. The Sinai campaign would not have been necessary. In sort of pushing history backwards here...

BEN-GURION: Oh, I think it would have, yes....

BAYNE: If Kennedy had been then, and if Kennedy had recognized China or vice versa...

BEN-GURION: Oh, yes.

BAYNE: ...then Sinai would not have been necessary.

BEN-GURION: Well, then, Kennedy was not yet there.

BAYNE: No, he wasn't. I'm saying...

BEN-GURION: ____ yes. Oh, yes.

BAYNE: If 1950—they came to power in '49—if from that time a man like Kennedy would be head, the whole world picture, I think, would be different. Because I know how Russia badly needs Europe. I mean the West. When I saw "Europe," I mean also, of course, America. But they're frightened. They're terribly afraid. Because internally they're not quite safe, you see. Russia is not America. In America they have immigrants from all different countries but they all became Americans. In Russia you have nations, especially nations that hate Russians. A friend of mine whom I met when I was there in '23—he was allowed to go to Israel, exceptional case. And he knows the position I have. And he told me the Muslim countries who are under the Russians in Asia, while they're now the ____, they're not Muslim anymore, but they're nationalist and they hate Russia. Any why they hate the Russians, therefore China. And the Russians know it, and they're afraid.

But whichever problem you have in the world, you first need China. China is a fact of life. They're a symbol. The Asian continent—you have more than half of humanity there. And they play such a big role in these two countries: Russia and China. In Asia, they are the biggest countries. And they are enemies. And they are afraid of each other. Rather, Russia's more afraid than China. China's not afraid, because China knows after ten or twenty years, they will have as good a bomb as the Russians have.

BAYNE: Did you feel when President Kennedy was in power that this kind of idea—that you could write to him and suggest this, that there was a means of communication with you, even though you didn't see each other very often?

BEN-GURION: Well, I didn't—I cannot say. I've had communications, but I don't remember that I wrote about that. But once I wanted to go only because of that, to America. I was invited by, perhaps you ought to know, _____.

BAYNE: Yes, I read your speech...

BEN-GURION: Santa Barbara...

BAYNE: I read your speech.

BEN-GURION: But I was invited. I said no, because I was afraid when I got there I would be invited here and there and I'd like to visit.... So I said no. Then he wrote me a long letter explaining to me what institute it is, what kind of people is there. Then I said, this is my best opportunity to speak about China, and I was ready to come, but I asked him not to publish that I am coming. But on the way it was known and I began to receive invitations. So I sent him a letter, "I'm sorry, I'm not able to come, but I'm sending you my report, my lecture." It was mainly on China. And they published it. You got it?

BAYNE: Yes. As a matter of fact, I got it from you.

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[NOTE: Pages 13 through 15 were missing from the original transcript, so the pagination for this content does not follow that of the rest of the document]

BEN-GURION: Ah, from me. Oh. I see, I see.

BAYNE: This was after Kennedy had been assassinated, I think. It was the summer somewhere afterwards. One of the things that has struck me is the amount of personal...

BEN-GURION: A person has to wait four years until Johnson has been reelected because I still hope that if Johnson will be reelected, he also will do it.

BAYNE: Maybe.

BEN-GURION: But was three years is something...

BAYNE: One of the things that has struck me about Kennedy's regime is the amount of personal correspondence that he had with chiefs of state around the world in which there was just .a great deal of just simple give-and-take.

BEN-GURION: Well, I believe that I sent copies of all our correspondence to his brother.

BAYNE: To Robert [Robert F. Kennedy]. These will go in the files as well. Did you feel that the correspondence that you got from him was really from him, that it had a personal touch to it?

BEN-GURION: There were seven. I cannot say that he wrote everything. No, but certainly I felt it was Kennedy.

BAYNE: Sometimes it is obviously written by the State Department or somebody else.

BEN-GURION: Yes. But there are certain phrases and a certain attitude—it was Kennedy.

BAYNE: This was a carry-on of this intimate quality that you felt?

BEN-GURION: Yes.

BAYNE: I think that this is a very interesting insight into the President.

BEN-GURION: Now, really, it was such a great tragedy for such a man in the middle of his life to have a madman kill him.

BAYNE: The image you give of him.

BEN-GURION: I don't know what it is with the...

BAYNE: Security?

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BEN-GURION: The intelligence and security.

BAYNE: Well, you can't cover a madman in that sense. But, the image that you give of him is essentially that, whereas vis-à-vis a specific

special interests... problem like the Middle East, he might have been captive of certain

BEN-GURION: There was a combination of three things: youth, courage, and convictions. This was such a combination.

BAYNE: This is a world image rather than a specific image.

BEN-GURION: Yes.

BAYNE: In terms of your own region, for example. Well, good. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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