

Charles E. Bohlen, Oral History Interview – 5/21/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Charles E. Bohlen
Interviewer: Schlesinger, Arthur M.
Date of Interview: May 21, 1964
Length: 38 pages

Biographical Note

Bohlen was Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Soviet Affairs from 1960-1962, and Ambassador to France from 1962-1967. In this interview, Bohlen discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) views of the Soviet Union; foreign relations crises during the Kennedy administration, including the Bay of Pigs, war in Laos, and Cuban Missile Crisis; and Bohlen's assessment of JFK as a president and a man, among other issues.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed on January 27, 1965, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Charles E. Bohlen, recorded interview by Arthur M. Schlesinger, May 21, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT
BY CHARLES E. BOHLEN TO THE
JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY LIBRARY

In accordance with the provisions of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 as amended (63 Stat. 377) and regulations issued thereunder, I, CHARLES E. BOHLEN, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a transcript and tape recording of a personal statement approved by me on July 28, 1964, and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this document is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument available for research in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. At the same time, it is his wish to guard against the possibility of its contents being used to embarrass, damage, injure or harass anyone. Therefore, in pursuance of this objective, and in accordance with the provisions of Sec. 507(f)(3) of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended, this material is to be treated as "Confidential" and shall not during the lifetime of those individuals discussed therein be made available for examination by anyone except persons who have received my express written authorization to examine it. This restriction shall not apply to employees of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library engaged in performing normal archival work processes.

3. A revision of the above stipulation governing access to the aforesaid material may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States or his designee if it appears desirable to revise the conditions herein stipulated.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

5. The donor retains to himself (during his lifetime) all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument. After the death of the donor, the aforesaid literary property rights will pass to the United States of America.

Signed Charles E. Fohlen
Charles E. Fohlen

Date _____

Accepted Wayne L. Fourn
Archivist of the United States

Date January 27, 1965

Charles E. Bohlen

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Early impressions of John F. Kennedy (JFK)
2, 7	JFK's knowledge about and views on the Soviet Union
3	Vienna meeting with Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev
9	JFK's state visit to Paris
11	Laos
13	Bay of Pigs invasion
18	Nuclear disarmament and nuclear test ban
21	US-France relations
23	Cuban Missile Crisis
27, 35	Reflections on JFK as a president and a man
30	JFK's weaknesses
32	JFK's views on the State Department and Foreign Service

Oral History Interview

with

Charles E. Bohlen

May 21, 1964

By Arthur M. Schlesinger, J4.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SCHELSINGER: Chip, you first knew John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] back in Moscow, when was it—'38 or '39?

BOHLEN: I first met John Kennedy in Moscow in either '38 or '39, I'm not quite sure which year. His father [Joseph P. Kennedy] was Ambassador to Great Britain at that time and he had just come in to Moscow on a visit. We saw a bit of him there—had him to lunch and other meals and I remember very well how impressed we were with his charm and his intelligence. I can't say that beyond that there were any definite impressions except that he was an extremely personable, attractive, and bright young man.

I didn't really get to know Kennedy until after he became President. I met him one or two times in Washington and I remember one occasion in the winter of 1960 at a dinner at Joe Alsop's [Joseph Alsop] at which Hugh Gaitskell, the British Labor Leader, was present, Joe, of course, Dean Acheson [Dean G. Acheson], Stewart Alsop, Al Friendly [Alfred Friendly], Senator Kennedy, Senator Fulbright [J. William Fulbright], and myself. The evening did not produce anything from Senator Kennedy who had enough sense to keep his mouth shut while a fight was going on between Dean Acheson, Gaitskell, aided and abetted by Jose Alsop. But I was impressed then with the extraordinary self-control that he displayed in keeping his mouth shut while this was going on.

Then I really came to know Kennedy after he became President and I remember him in the early days of his Administration coming over to the Department of State and speaking to the members of the

[-1-]

Department. It was a very impressive performance. He was clear and crisp and bright and I think it gave everybody in the Department a very great lift to have the President of the United States come over to a government department. I think he was the first president to do this since Woodrow Wilson, someone told me, but anyway, it had not been done in any of the later years. Then, the second time, after that, I began to work on the Russian affairs in the Department of State and I kept on the same position I had previously, namely, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State, and my work was primarily centered on all aspects of our relations with the Soviet Union. This involved a good deal of contact with the President because I think, as you know, Arthur, the President took an intense personal interest in every aspect of foreign affairs of the United States, and it was not a bit infrequent to have the telephone ring and hear the voice of the President on the other end, often on relatively routine questions, but he had an insatiable desire to find out all there was to know about the conduct of foreign affairs.

SCHELSINGER: What was his conception, do you think, of the Soviet Union?

BOHLEN: Like almost every person that I ran into during the course of my specialization in that field, he really felt he had to find out for himself. The issues and the consequences of mistakes of a serious nature in dealing with the Soviet Union are so great that no man of any character or intelligence will really wholeheartedly accept the views of anybody else.

[-2-]

I don't mean to say that he had to go back to first steps about the Soviet Union—there are a certain number of factors in regard to that country that have been so drilled home during the course of the 45 years or so of its existence that he obviously started from that—but what I mean that when you came down to any refinement of interpretation, the President always listened with the greatest attention to what you had to say, but you always felt that he was going to put this to a test and this was one of the reasons why I was so keen on having the Vienna meeting. There were some questions against it, particularly the one that would immediately follow his State visit to France and we were well aware of the touchiness on subjects of protocol of General de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle], but in balancing all these things off, I felt strongly, and I think that most of the people in Department of State did also, that it would be better for him to meet Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev], to make his acquaintance, to get a feel of the type of man he was dealing with and the type of situation he was confronting. The Vienna meeting was certainly not a very gay one; while Khrushchev was superficially polite, he was very tough and set forth some very hard positions which, had he adhered to them, would have led to a major confrontation over

Berlin. I think this meeting with Khrushchev very much affected the President and as is normal and natural in cases of kind, I always felt that he somewhat over-interpreted.

[-3 -]

He assumed that the position that Khrushchev had taken was the final and fixed position of the Soviet Union and that he had to face a very serious crisis over Berlin some time later that year. However, he didn't lose his sense of humor and certainly not his nerve in dealing with Khrushchev and the last words he said to Khrushchev as he was leaving was, "I see it is going to be a very cold winter."

SCHELSINGER: How did he conduct himself in the conversations with Khrushchev?

BOHLEN: Excellently—I mean, he was a very good listener, Kennedy was, to really anybody whose opinion he wanted to hear. He had an intensity of attention which was quite remarkable. You really felt as though he was drawing out from you every aspect of a subject and he was certainly able to keep from talking himself until the other fellow had completely exhausted his views, so while he was quiet in his dealings with Khrushchev, he was perfectly firm, in my opinion. I would say there was only one mistake that he made—which is an understandable one—that he got drawn into a sort of ideological discussion with Khrushchev and there admittedly, Kennedy was not anywhere near the expert that Nikita Khrushchev was in the field of Marxian ideology.

SCHELSINGER: What aspects of ideology...

BOHLEN: This because Khrushchev was explaining how he viewed the development of the world situation; that revolutions were in effect really, dealing with the status quo and that the

[-4 -]

Soviet Union, as a country, based upon a revolution, could no more keep from helping these, however not interfering with any internal events of a country but, whenever possible, in accordance with international norms, so he said, the Soviet Union would always sympathize and tend to support a movement of any form of revolution, particularly against colonial possessions—and Kennedy sought to answer this, somewhat on an ideological basis, explaining that he thought this was not in accordance with the future of the world, and it seemed to me—I haven't got the records here, of course—but it seemed to me, as I remember, that he got a little bit out of his depth. But this didn't go on for very long because most of the subject centered down to the discussion of Berlin and here Khrushchev was absolutely adamant, said that this situation had to be changed and that a "free" independent West Berlin was the only solution and with all the angles to it that we had known so well in the past; but he impressed the President with his strength and with apparently his determination to go through with this. The President responded, as was quite proper, by the

mobilization of a certain number of American troops, not general mobilization or anything as exaggerated as that, but a sufficient strengthening of the American Forces in Europe as to convey to the Soviet Union that we were going to meet this challenge head-on, if necessary, and this, I think, was one of the main reasons why,

[-5 -]

later on that Fall at the 22nd Party Conference, Khrushchev withdrew, so to speak, the time limit and the Berlin situation simmered down to normal. I'd like to say one thing, however, that insofar as foreign affairs was concerned, with the exception of Cuba, which we can discuss later, I would say that Berlin occupied most of Kennedy's time from the point of view of hours spent in discussion, even more than the situation in Laos or Vietnam.

SCHELSINGER: There were always contingency plans.

BOHLEN: Yes, there were, many of those. There were all sorts of different studies and different people were invited to make studies because I think that Kennedy with the practical, clear mind that he had, it just seemed to him intolerable that the West, that is to say the United States, could not come up with a logical and accepted solution on it. While it's true that some of the real factors of the Berlin situation are continually hidden from us, nevertheless, I think that those who have been in the Soviet field realize that this is a sort of result of the ____ ideological ____ nationalist push that the Soviet Union undertook at the end of the war and in many ways that the Soviet Union is caught in the Berlin situation with no more power of maneuver, less, if anything, than the West has.

[-6 -]

SCHELSINGER: Before Vienna, was there an occasion when President Kennedy called you and Averell [William Averell Harriman] and Tommy Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson, Jr.] to discuss....

BOHLEN: Yes, Tommy Thompson was Ambassador to the Soviet Union and he came on home for consultation and we had two full mornings, or afternoons, of meetings, on the general discussion of the Soviet Union. At that time, as I recall, the President didn't do very much talking as he was more interested in finding out from others what their views were. There seemed to be a pretty general consensus with shadings here and there. I would say perhaps I emphasized that the ideological element in Soviet policy was still there and still strong and Averell tended to emphasize sort of the personal nature of Khrushchev rule, holding the view that people who had known him and dealt with him would be the best people to deal with him in the future.

SCHELSINGER: I wonder who he had in mind.

BOHLEN: This is a little matter that is lost, shrouded in the mists of history.

SCHELSINGER: Did the President rather minimize the ideological aspects do you think?

BOHLEN: I think that he did and he didn't. He didn't quite understand it because I don't believe—I never had the impression—that President Kennedy had seriously read Marx [Karl Marx] or Lenin [Vladimir Ilyich Lenin], or any of the Soviet theoretical writers very much. He obviously had a general outline

[-7-]

as to what it was all about but any of the subtleties of the doctrine and particularly the subtleties of its application by the Russians, I felt was somewhat of a closed book to him. He was much more interested in the practical aspect of it. He saw Russia as a great and powerful country and we were a great and powerful country and it seemed to him that there must be some basis upon which the two countries could live without blowing each other up. Well, in actual fact, the way matters stand now, it would look as though the horrors of nuclear war has been the factor that has produced a possibility for this non-fighting between us and the Soviet Union. I think the Soviet Union fully recognizes that a nuclear war would mean the utter ruination of Russia and a partial ruination of the United States and that, therefore, any policy whose logical end was war, has to be, so to speak, controlled from the beginning and I think this is what the peaceful co-existence means is in effect the elevation into a part of doctrine of what was formerly a well-known tactical maneuver of the Soviet Union.

SCHELSINGER: The Administration started out in rather an optimistic mood, as I recall, about the Soviet Union.

[-8-]

BOHLEN: I thought on that that the President was very solid and good. Some of his advisors were rather optimistic, some of them who were new to the field rather had the view that a few gestures that Khrushchev had made in connection with the President's selection such as the release of the B-47 really meant a great new approach, et cetera, et cetera. But Kennedy was very solid and, I thought, sound, on it. In fact, one of the things that always impressed me with President Kennedy's mind was that it seemed to be a mentality extraordinarily free from pre-conceived prejudices, inherited or otherwise, and that he approached any problem with a clarity that was certainly a pleasure to hold in operation. You felt that when he came to a subject it was almost as though he had thrown aside the normal prejudices that beset human mentality—I think this was one of his great qualities.

SCHELSINGER: What happened in Paris?

BOHLEN: In Paris, the thing was so taken up with a series of ceremonial visits that there wasn't really a great deal of business work and the two of his

meetings with de Gaulle were just the two of them and interpreters, so I only know from the records of it, but on the ceremonial side, the visit was a tremendous success. The people of Paris really reacted very warmly to this young couple, both himself and to Jacqueline [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], and I must say they made a very thrilling sight when they were all dressed up for this party out at Versailles. The French Government,

[-9-]

needless to say, really did it up beautifully—entertainment and ceremonies were of the highest order.

SCHELSINGER: [Unintelligible]

BOHLEN: Most of the meetings with de Gaulle were just the two of them and I have seen the records, but I recall at one point the President telling me afterwards that de Gaulle had said to him “You can listen to your advisors before you make up your mind, but once you have made up your mind then do not listen to anyone.” I think the President was somewhat impressed with this as a technique of government and it certainly makes a good deal of sense and is certainly one de Gaulle followed to the extremes.

In regard to the Berlin matter, there were, of course, many meetings during that summer on the subject of Berlin and the President had asked Dean Acheson to do a study and come up with some recommendations as to how to deal with the Berlin situation. As I recall it, Dean Acheson’s first recommendation was that the country should go to full mobilization since this would be the only real way of impressing the Russians and showing that you meant real business. The President, however, rejected this advice and went in for partial mobilization, which most of us favored. It seemed to us to be too extreme to put the country like the United States into full mobilization or at least almost full mobilization for a situation like Berlin. This would have created dislocations, repercussions within the country, and all over the world

[-10-]

it would have been regarded as proof of American hysteria. The other questions, of course, that occupied a great deal of the President’s time was the first one, the Laos question, and there I was not in on that in all its phases because while communism was in effect the enemy, there was very little indication of direct Russian involvement despite the Soviet planes that were out there and the studies on this were conducted by a special group made up of people who specialized in Far Eastern affairs. But it was rather apparent that the President, after looking over the situation that he found on his hands when he took office, had come to the conclusion that Laos was not the country in which to have any American involvement. He was appalled, I believe, at the character and the skimpy nature of American military planning in that area. I remember once his saying to me that he had been startled to find that there was no plan for involvement in Laos which had any detail work done on it and that there were many questions that were completely unanswered by our military. But, in any event, he

apparently came to the conclusion that this was not the place to put in any American troops—if you did, it would mean a ____ under worse conditions and a long drawn-out war without end.

[-11-]

SCHELSINGER: He was unimpressed, do you think, by Joe Alsop's arguments that it was better to make our stand in Laos...

BOHLEN: Well, now here is an example of what I mentioned earlier—the extraordinary freedom and clarity of the President's mind. He didn't think in those terms—that we must make a stand or else—or in what you might call subjective terms, he looked at it and he saw it was all very well to say you make a stand in Laos but what do you mean when you make a stand in Laos—where will it get you, what will you be drawn into, what chances will you have of winning a war of that nature, unless you took the major step, which would indeed have been a major step, and still would be, an attack on China which would be a major war with the possible involvement of the Soviet Union and all those consequences, and that, therefore, to say that if you don't make a stand now you're going to be worse off is a kind of a related subjective approach to the matter, because the question is what happens when you make a stand now you're going to be worse off is a kind of a related subjective approach to the matter, because the question is what happens when you make a stand—what are the chances of success as against what opportunities, in a different line, are offered and here the possibility of a conference on Laos would set up so-called neutral, independent Laos with commitments by all the participating nations with the respect for this neutrality with

[-12-]

supposedly a government of national union composed of the three elements in Laos—the so-called Rightists, so-called Neutralists and the Pathet Lao, which is the communist element—at least would afford some hope of diplomatic and political action. Of course, parenthetically, at the time I'm making this interview, the situation in Laos does not look very sanguine in any way, but you can't be very sanguine about it. On the other hand, in 1961, it seemed of the various choices open to the United States Government, the best one.

SCHELSINGER: One of the big events, of course, and the most dramatic event that first spring was the Cuban episode.

BOHLEN: Well now my involvement in that was very curious because I was asked for my opinion by some of the people working on it in regard to the whole Cuban venture, but only very briefly, and then I said that mostly in regard to the possible international complications which might arise, and I said then that I thought any operation of that kind had to be sure to be quick and successful, that if it dragged on, it was going to be a losing battle with us unless we were prepared to take it over to ____ which we were not prepared to do. However, one time I was asked to the White House where there were some people from the CIA—Allen Dulles [Allen W. Dulles], Tracy

Barnes, and Dick Bissell [Richard Mervin Bissell, Jr.]. And a Colonel whose name I have forgotten, who was working on the operation for

[-13-]

the CIA and the discussion was about the landing, how it was to be planned, and I was there in order to give my views as to what the Russian reaction would be and I stuck to that in the White House, but afterwards, going back in the car, I queried the CIA people rather closely as to why they chose to make an invasion and why they didn't do it through the infiltration of guerillas and let them go up in the hills and when they were sufficiently numerous, have them proclaim a provisional government or something like from the hills, which would have given us a much stronger legal basis in which to do anything, and they explained that you couldn't get the type of equipment which they felt was needed to ____ through individual infiltrations or small group infiltrations. I didn't have anything further to do with the Cuban thing until after the event and after the failure was becoming apparent. I may say, however, parenthetically, there is one thing which I will always regret very deeply and that was coming back in the plane at the end of March, 1961, from the Key West meeting with Harold Macmillan [M. Harold Macmillan]. The President turned to me in the plane and said, "Chip, I want to talk to you about Cuba some day" and I said, "Mr. President, I would be delighted to talk with you about Cuba, but I really do not know anything about Latin America and, therefore,

[-14-]

there are many others in the Department of State who know more than I do and I would recommend that you talk with them rather than me." The President didn't say anything but he apparently accepted this since he never mentioned it to me until after the event. I've often regretted this possibility of—while you never know exactly what you will say—I know what my views were, which were that any attempt of invasion from outside of a bunch of refugees would be historically a failure before you start, assuming that you were not prepared to commit the United States to it but I couldn't think, at that time, of any historical precedent which would justify that refugees who had fled as the result of a revolution ever being brought back under their own steam, however much help they got indirectly from another country. But my involvement in the Cuban thing came at the moment when Khrushchev wrote a nasty note to the President about it and I helped prepare over in the Department of State, the answer. And from then on I sat over in the White House as the Bay of Pigs operation was in its closing stages, and it became clearer and clearer that the results were total and utter disaster and I helped worked on the President's speech before the Association of Newspaper Editors. And I must say at that time I think the President showed himself as to what he really had in him because this was a very

[-15-]

difficult and disheartening moment but he handled it, I thought, in a very masterful fashion and I remember one occasion, the only time when I had ever seen him really sharp in his tone

very greatly, and this was at one point when Vice President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] was making some criticism of the CIA on a generalized basis and the President turned to him and said rather sharply, "Lyndon, you've got to remember we're all in this and that when I accepted the responsibility for this operation, I took the entire responsibility on myself and I will have no sort of passing of the buck or backbiting, however justified." This very much helped in the post-Bay of Pigs consideration of the affair since there was no tendency, at least that I saw after that, immediately to place the blame on one organization or the other. It's obvious that as time went on, there was a great deal of talk around Washington—a great many papers picked up this, that, or the other aspect.

SCHELSINGER: What would you say was the impact of Cuba on President Kennedy's mode of operation....

BOHLEN: Well, I would say very definitely because after that in a day or so, when I was working on the speech he made to the editors, I had breakfast over there and afterwards we went for a walk in the garden and he told me then

[-16-]

that he had realized he would have to go much deeper into any operation of the nature of this kind with the consequences it could have than he had in regard to the Bay of Pigs. He intended to take the views of the people who he felt were expert but he realized that a person in the presidential position—when he was going to give the final decision—would have to really know first-hand all of the major elements of any operation. So I think, in the future, that you found Kennedy scrutinizing very much more closely any operation of any importance. Of course, there were none of a practical nature that had the impact of importance as the Bay of Pigs operation but I think that this can be applied to his approach to any operational problem of foreign affairs. It also, I think.... his faith in the American military was very much shaken. He spoke to me about his disappointment in the then Chiefs of Staff and the fact that he was going to have to make some changes in it. I think he felt they did not measure up to the requirements of the situation and indeed shortly thereafter there was a rather thorough overhauling of the Chiefs of Staff mechanism—immediately, I've forgotten when—when was Maxwell [Maxwell D. Taylor]....

SCHELSINGER: He was brought in first as part of the inquiry on the Cuba thing and then some months later, the White House.

[-17-]

BOHLEN: And then when did he become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—when Lemnitzer came over to Paris? Yes, that was considerably later. But I was very much impressed with the calmness, the coolness, with which the President _____, as they say in France, a defeat. And there is certainly no better test of a man's basic quality than the ability to face adversity and to come through it with

everything intact. And his speech, I thought, was most successful to the newspaper editors, not because I worked on it, but because largely the manner in which he delivered it and the tone which he set, which seemed to me to pick up fortunes which were rather low on the scale at that particular point and I was very much impressed to see how he dealt with adversity.

SCHELSINGER: Another thing in 1961 was the Soviet resumption nuclear testing.

BOHLEN: Yes, that I was in on but that got mixed up so much with the disarmament thing in which Bill Foster [William C. Foster] was and the consultations with the British became very important. There wasn't much to do except to register the fact that the Russians had at their own will and their own timing broken sort of a tacit agreement that existed. The Russians were quite correct in saying, as they did at one point, that there had really been no agreement since, I believe, President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] sometime earlier on had sent word to them that we didn't consider

[-18-]

ourselves bound by any understanding in this field. Of course, we didn't test, so in a sense there was this tacit agreement, and he then resumed the tests in the United States the next spring. He didn't fight the resumption of tests, I mean he felt that this was a very dangerous form of sport to go down the road testing—you could see at that time, of course, it brought on the germ of what turned out to be the Moscow Treaty. In fact, he and Macmillan made the offer to Khrushchev to have this partial test ban, excluding underground tests, in doubt that the Russians might be willing to call off the series, that the Russians went through with their series and up to very much later, in fact to the spring-summer of 1963 showed no interest in a partial test ban.

SCHELSINGER: I have the impression that the President, and Macmillan too, were both emotionally more wrapped up in the test ban than almost any other effort.

BOHLEN: Yes, I think that's true, that he was very much emotionally.... because I think that if you had the responsibility of sitting over a button which you could press and blow up the world, this was one very terrible and heavy responsibility and I think that anything which appeared to lighten the nuclear landscape, as it were, would be something that the President would have, just as a human being, be very welcome to him because it

[-19-]

would have seemed to push back the frontier of danger of the use of atomic weapons. Another thing I remember hearing the President, which always interested me very much, was in May, 1962, when André Malraux, French Minister of Culture, was over there on a visit

and it was a very small lunch at Glen Ora. There was the President and Mrs. Kennedy, André Malraux and his wife [Marie-Madeline Lioux], the Alphands [Herve Alphand; Nicole Alphand], the Mac Bundys [Mary Bundy; McGeorge Bundy], and Avis [Avis Howard Bohlen] and I. And, after lunch, the President got into a discussion with Malraux about what was the function of political power in the future, in a modern state. He seemed to think that most of the problems of the past, which had been given hard political content, would, over a few years, become solved in the sense that they would be transferred from the political arena to ____ the administrative arena, and he thought that the definition and limitation of the functions of the executive, particularly out of the government in general in a modern state, would undergo very radical change. It was at this same meeting that Malraux told him that he thought that de Gaulle considered, he thought he had one great phase of his work to complete and that was to bring about a political revolution in France's structure and he told de Gaulle then that he thought that he would probably.

[BEGIN SIDE II]

It was very obvious, I think, to anyone who saw him and heard him talk on the subject that de Gaulle had a

[-20-]

curious fascination for President Kennedy. He was always trying to find out what made the man tick, why he acted the way he did, and what particular motivation he was working on, and he would come back to this subject very often. In fact, later on, after I was Ambassador to France, every time I came home I would go down to Palm Beach where he was and he would talk all the time about this angle or that angle of de Gaulle's personality, this policy or that policy—he was obviously groping around, trying to get something to satisfy him as an explanation for what is often very curious behavior on de Gaulle's part. I think he finally came to the conclusion that de Gaulle needed some form of friction with the United States for his own personal policies, domestic and otherwise, but Kennedy was equally determined that he was not going to oblige him on this. I think he was very much keeping a steady gaze on the French scene, never getting angry with de Gaulle, certainly not falling for any of the particular maneuvers de Gaulle was engaged in—in other words, trying to keep a steady course and fixing his attention on the fact that France was rather more important than the personality of General de Gaulle. I may say, parenthetically, however, that I always had the impression that de Gaulle had great respect

[-21-]

for President Kennedy. Whenever the subject of the President came up, he always went out of his way to make a few nice phrases and obviously finally agreed to meet the President in the winter of 1964 only because he felt it would be very awkward not to do it. de Gaulle clearly had no desire for the meeting—not that he didn't wish to see Kennedy, but he felt there were no subjects they could really reach any useful agreements on and he did have a feeling that a meeting without agreements in the present state of the world would be a very

unfortunate thing. He agreed to do it and would, undoubtedly, have gone over, had it not been for the President's death.

SCHELSINGER: Did the President ever seem to have any doubts about the course of policy towards France?

BOHLEN: Yes, there was a good deal of discussion about whether or not it would be a wise thing to reverse our nuclear policy and to give France of our own free will, all of our so-called secrets and others but after considering it very carefully, the President came down on the conclusion that our course was the correct one. I must say I feel myself that even had there been any change of U.S. policy on this subject, it would have had no effect on de Gaulle's policy and it's even doubtful how much he would have accepted from the United States if it had contained any strings on it which would

[-22-]

have bound him to accept U.S. advice on certain political matters. In fact, in the nuclear field, it is rather difficult to accept assistance from a country without to some extent becoming dependent on it for the continuance of the supplies. For a moment now, to leave the subject of France and to turn to the final denouement with Cuba and the Soviet Union which certainly, I think, will go down in history as the greatest moment of his administration. This was a very curious matter because I had an appointment to see the President on Tuesday, October 16, to say goodbye to him before going over to France. We didn't mention the word "France" once during the interview because he had just that morning received the CIA overflight intelligence report showing that the Russians were engaged in installing medium-range missiles in Cuba. We had quite a discussion on this subject and there seemed to be no doubt in his mind, and certainly none in mine, that the United States would have to get these bases eliminated, the only question was how it was to be done. I saw him that night at dinner at Joe Alsop's and while this was still top secret, the President, after dinner, took me out on the porch to discuss further the Cuban matter and as to the various modalities of how you could do this and, of course, there were an infinite number of combinations that could be worked out for the American action. During that evening he told me he thought it would be a mistake for me to go to Paris; that I should remain in Washington. I told him I would do whatever he wanted me to and would see what could be done to provide the necessary cover story.

[-23-]

SCHELSINGER: Was there any indication that night as to how his thinking was running?

BOHLEN: I wouldn't say so—I think he just hit the subject and was exploring down the different ways whether or not it would be an approach to

Castro [Fidel Castro] or an approach to Khrushchev—I remember his bringing up that question and the question of the time element—how far along these constructions had gone, how quickly he would have to move, and the various types of international complications that were involved. The next morning he called me up and said he thought I should stay, and overnight I had had some doubts because of the fact that I had a number of engagements in New York and my trip to Paris had been publicized and I was supposed to be leaving on the ship and I would have to invent some excuse, but I said I would try and do it. In the meantime, I talked with the Secretary of State, who also shared my doubts—he said he thought it might be better for me to get over to France, that I might be more useful there than I would be here. So the President then called me back after talking to Rusk [Dean Rusk], and said that he thought, reluctantly, he was kind enough to say, that I'd better go on to my post in Paris. Then there was one curious incident later on as I was leaving the airport in Washington the next morning about 10:00, checked in on the plane, and I was paged—there was a call from Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] from the White House saying the President wanted me to be at this meeting at 11:00. I sent back word that I was on my way to New York, that I had engagement there and it would be very difficult to change it, and the word came back from O'Donnell

[-24-]

that the President regretted this very much but must insist that I come. So then I said please let me talk to the President and when I got the President, I explained that I was speaking at a luncheon of Franc-Amerique Association in New York that day and that it would be very difficult for me to get out of it; in fact, I remember saying I'd have to go out of here and break a leg on the station platform, and the President then said well you'd better go ahead and do it. At that point, I lost touch with the situation. I wrote a memorandum in longhand, however, which I gave to Dean Rusk which he told me he had read to the President and which the President afterwards mentioned, which merely said that the main purpose in this thing is to get these bases removed and that, if necessary, we would do it by military means but, if possible, we should try by political and diplomatic means. I said I thought there was at least a chance that the Russians would take them out if we put up the corresponding force and our willingness to use it if necessary, and as I recall I also recommended to re-think out the possibility of using an approach to Castro directly in a sort of ultimatic form as well as one to Khrushchev. I knew that the President was going to speak on the following Monday night but I did not know which one of the variants which were before him he would choose, so I had to sit an uneasy two/three days on the ship.

SCHELSINGER: Had the demand for a strike gotten much of a momentum...

BOHLEN: No. It had begun, yes, and certain of the people had talked about the idea of an air strike but even then before I left—and this was still in full discussion—it seemed to me that

[-25-]

this would not be accepted because this would involve the killing of a lot of Russians and this is the kind of thing that the Russians, with their primitive stance, would have probably reacted to and that you might have pushed it over the edge into the inevitable war development. In other words, that the Russians might have felt bound to respond to that with some sort of military action which would have escalated up the line. But certainly from the manner in which the President handled that crisis, I would say with the admiration of the entire free world. And I think this did more than anything else to sort of prove the President to the world than any other single event of his administration, because it was not only the combination of the firmness and calmness and reason which was employed in that—that he didn't take any step which would have automatically precipitated it into a war and he left no loopholes or weakness he could have been bamboozled, as it were, by the Russians.

SCHELSINGER: Do you believe that Cuba was the great turning point and that in a sense....

BOHLEN: Yes, I think it is and although I thought a great deal about the thing I have come up with no clear answer as to why Khrushchev thought he could get away with putting these missiles into Cuba. It was obvious what he intended to do with them, once he had them in there. They would be an enormous pressure weapon against the United States, and he would undoubtedly have come to New York in November. There were clear indications he was planning to come to the United Nations and confront the United States in effect with the virtual ultimatum in regard to Berlin,

[-26-]

using these missiles in Cuba for that purpose. But why he thought he could get away with it, I think, remains at the moment a mystery. It's conceivable that he thought we would fool around, take it to the UN, then become legalistic about it; meantime he would go forward with his constructions and have them there. But still, this is a little unlike normal Russian behavior and I'm frank to admit that I was one of those, before the event, the summer before, who did not feel that the Russians would take the risk of putting offensive weapons in Cuba.

Now I'm coming to the end of this talk, Arthur, and I'd just like to say a few words about the general impressions of Kennedy as a man and as a president. It's not easy to define, because there was a certain intangible quality about him. I've already mentioned the extraordinary clarity, unbiased nature of his intelligence and then, of course, there was the extraordinary charm of his personality, the flash of his wit. He had what the French call *esprit*, which is spirit if you will, but meaning a little more than spirit. It's more of an intellectual quality than just a spiritual one; and, if we can say, with whoever said it, *le style c'est l'homme*. I think that Kennedy's style, the imprint he left on anything he did and on any audience that he saw, as I said, the flashes of wit which were sort of dead-pan but really with a great deal of style which was very much his own. In effect, I think that the people of the world, including the people around him, and I think de Gaulle felt this too parenthetically, but that Kennedy was essentially a twentieth century man. He was

[-27-]

a man of the future. He was a man that you could have counted on to produce some big venture or some new idea. He was always working on it because I think his real ambition was historically—he wanted to be known as a great president. And again to go back a little, I remember one of these seminars that Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] had organized, being held in the White House and I don't know whether you were at that one or not when there was a professor from Princeton—David Donald [David Herbert Donald] was there and the President was constantly putting questions as to what he thought went in to the making of a great President as against a mediocre President. As you can see, this was very much on his mind. But as I say, he was a man of the future and I think at his assassination, I know I felt as though the future had retreated to the present. And there was an unknown quality about Kennedy, despite all his realism, that gave you infinite hope that somehow or other he was going to change the course of history and you knew that if he did it would be in one direction, that would be to solidify and calm down the world and more or less render the keeping of the peace more secure. And I think this is what most people saw in him. I think in both of them they saw a young couple, very much of the modern world who would produce some answers as to what heretofore had been insoluble questions.

SCHELSINGER: What about problems of political leadership?

BOHLEN: Well, this is a little bit outside of my field in the

[-28-]

domestic thing, and while I can admire the skill with which the convention was handled and all this sort of stuff, I didn't have enough first-hand knowledge of how political leadership in the united States worked. But it seemed to me one of the difficulties that President Kennedy ran into was that he was so far ahead of the mechanism which he had to work with, namely the Congress, that it was perhaps the big question of his second term would have been his ability to obtain the necessary action from Congressional support. Now whether this would have come on, and I personally like to think that it would have—in his second term that would come with increased confidence and everything that would come to him—experience—that he would have been more successful with a future Congress than he had been with the one he found.

SCHLESINGER: I meant though leadership in the world sense—I remember his once saying that he thought we overused the word.

BOHLEN: Well we over-use the word leadership for the United States. Whenever we talk about we're destined for world leadership, this sets off little spasms of irritation in many countries. It may be technically true, but I'm not even sure that it's technically true. In a military sense, we certainly are the outstanding country, the leader of the free world if you want, but in the political field I don't

think we are. But this does not mean that an individual with the proper touch and proper understanding of things cannot be a leader, because the very fact

[-29-]

of being a leader of the greatest country makes you certainly one of the leading figures of the world. But I don't think that Kennedy would ever have abused that quality and I think he was very well aware that the situation in Europe had greatly changed in the last three or four years and was constantly changing, and he was not one to be tied or bound by a dead and still policy. He was always looking for new ways and new methods of carrying out the essential purposes of the United States. And he did have this enormous hold over the imagination of the people, at least in Western Europe, because I think if you could have seen the reactions of the people in France...

[BEGIN TAPE II]

BOHLEN: Since it must be apparent to anyone listening to this, of my profound admiration of President Kennedy both as a man and as a president, in part, being a human being, I suppose because of his great kindness to me, but I hope it's an objective analysis as I see it. I think the picture would be balanced and fair if I began to give some of the less positive sides of his approach. I would say in the first place that he had been somewhat over impressed buy Neustadt's [Richard E. Neudtadt] book on the power of the president in that a strong president always went outside of channels. I think in his handling, which I may say parenthetically improved considerably in the latter year or so, was his tendency to intervene directly into questions of detail, particularly on foreign affairs.

[-30-]

I've already mentioned the fact that the telephone would ring and the President would be on the other end frequently with relatively routine questions.

I think that as far as the Department of State is concerned, and here perhaps I'm guilty of special pleading, having been all my life in that body, that some of his weaknesses came out. He really was somewhat of the belief that an Ambassador or representative abroad must sell himself to the people of the country, in short, run what almost might be a personal popularity contest, and that a good Ambassador was one that was sort of beloved by the people and a bad one was one that was not very well known to the people. This is a view that in my 35 years in the foreign service I profoundly disagree with. It has always been my feeling that the function of diplomacy is the transaction of business between governments. It is true that an Ambassador that makes himself unpopular in the country will soon cease to have any standing with the government to which he is accredited, but you should not allow secondary factors to detract from the fundamental reasons for diplomacy, which, as I say, is the carrying out of the nation's business with foreign governments, and I emphasize government. This I feel President Kennedy could not always fully understand, but this, of course, is a relatively minor one. On the other hand, I found no signs of what was sometimes

described as a real prejudice against the Foreign Service of the United States. I always found him fair and just in any of his

[-31-]

appraisals of individuals and he was willing to come and speak to the American Foreign Service Association which he did brilliantly in the spring of 1962.

SCHELSINGER: Did he talk to you often about the Foreign Service?

BOHLEN: Occasionally yes. I had a number of conversations with him about the Foreign Service because he knew it was my chief interest in the Government and, as I say, I always found him perfectly fair. But he was certainly impatient with the slowness, as he termed it, of the Department of State. He felt that other government departments.... He put something up and you would get a quick answer back. I tried on a number of occasions to explain to him that foreign affairs did not make possible quick, snap answers in regard to any question of importance, because any question whatever relating to the foreign relations of the United States not only involved the repercussions and reactions which a certain course of action would produce throughout the world. It was, there, never possible to give a quick and easy answer on any substantive question. I once told him about Bob Lovett's [Robert Abercrombie Lovett] conclusion after having been in the Department of State for some 2-4 months. He had said he thought it was possible to organize it rather like a company with a vice-president in charge of this area of the world, and a vice-president in charge of another, but he soon found out that even the smallest insignificant question touching on foreign relations would have to very often come to the top for decision because of its

[-32-]

possible affect on the whole complex of our relationship and that often little tiny incidents would grow overnight into a major crisis. I recall once that the President asked me in these words, "What's wrong with that god dam department of yours, Chip?" and I told him that he was. He expressed some surprise and I told him that I thought he had presented Mr. Rusk with almost an impossible talk by appointing two of his subordinates before he had selected him. I also said that I thought in this administration there was a mistaken idea that an assistant secretaryship meant a big policy-making position in its own right. I said my concept of an assistant secretary was a person who would certainly have the knowledge and ability to expound his views on policy to the Secretary but that once a decision is made, and it would have to be made by the Secretary, he would then become an implementing officer for existing policy. I said I thought these were essentially positions which should be filled by the Foreign Service, to which the President replied, "Well, it's not easy to find good Foreign Service Officers." And I admitted that there was a good deal of truth in that but I thought that one of the efforts in the future should be to train individuals in the Foreign Service who would be able to work in the Department just as well as in the field and I mentioned to the

President that I had found a certain feeling in the administration that Foreign Service Officers should not be required to serve in so-called policy-making positions in

[-33-]

Washington since this exposed them to political winds. I told him I disagreed with this very strongly. My experience had been that Foreign Service Officers were just as willing, in fact more so, to stick their neck out than were political appointees. The President asked me if I had talked to Dean Rusk in this same way and I said I had in general but not very specifically and he urged me to do so, which I subsequently did. During this same conversation, the President mentioned to me that Rusk was the only cabinet officer that he did not call by his first name. When I subsequently mentioned this to The Secretary some time later, the Secretary said this was the way he preferred it.

SCHELSINGER: Who in the Department, do you think the President felt most easy with in discussing foreign policy?

BOHLEN: This is very hard to say because I never discussed with the President the other people in the Department of State; I think this is a very dangerous habit for a subordinate to indulge in so I do not know who he felt the most at home with. I think that with Secretary Rusk, for whom he had the highest regard—I don't think he felt that easy sort of relaxed relationship which was his normal way of dealing with people in the government, and I would be very much hard put to ____ which one he really gave special confidence to.

SCHELSINGER: What about foreign statesmen?

BOHLEN: Foreign statesmen he was excellent with. In the first place,

[-34-]

Kennedy brought to the presidency a knowledge of European history and European and in some ways an almost instinctive knowledge of European matters. I'm speaking more in that field because I know it better than the others. And I would say he was extremely successful with all the foreign statesman who came to Washington and also from what I could see and read, he was extremely successful with the Africans and Middle Easterners and others of these kind. He had a genuine gift for people, which, after all, is one of the attributes you require for great qualities in public figures, and he had the ability to give them confidence and as I said earlier, the ability to listen to them. In fact, I should say that President Kennedy, and I had said this previously on several occasions in Washington during the early days of his Administration, had all the ingredients of the making of a great president of the United States and that all he needed as a certain amount of luck, which everybody needs, and occasions on which he would be able to display these qualities. And I think the one in Cuba in October, 1962, was really very illustrative of what I had in made. I think this is what gave President Kennedy his world reputation. And of course the great tragedy for all of us is that he never

lived to carry out the promises that I think his personality and his training and his character held for us all.

SCHELSINGER: What about his conceptions of Europe—did he have a firm view of what the structure should be?

[-35-]

BOHLEN: No, I don't think he had that sort of very strong view or fixation. In fact, he was so mental, so intellectual in approach to these cases that you didn't feel he had very deep convictions as to the form one way or the other, which had its great advantages particularly in foreign affairs and particularly with a country like the United States where we usually have a tendency to become over-involved emotionally in whatever cause we are supporting. But, on the other hand, I think occasionally it gave the impression that Kennedy was not quite sure himself what the course was. This I don't believe was true, because it seemed to me he was often very slow to make up his mind when time permitted and would want to go into every nook and cranny of a situation before he would come down to the point he mentioned. For example, in the MLF, I had several talks with him about this "multilateral force" and told him my view, which I still hold, that unless we were prepared and to make plain we were prepared—that someday in the future if and when there was an European authority—to be willing to re-examine the control mechanisms even up to and including the possible withdrawal of the United States, that I felt that the whole scheme was a somewhat fraudulent one. He seemed to agree to agree with this and spoke subsequently to others on the importance of creating the impression that we were not trying to delude the Europeans by any sort of gimmick or scheme but that we would be prepared to re-examine the whole situation if and when the European authority

[-36-]

ever came in. But he took a very long time to make up his mind on this and only in the very end do I think he came very strongly down in favor of it.

SCHELSINGER: I agree with that and yet some period before he had really convinced himself this was a good policy, it had become nonetheless official U.S. policy.

BOHLEN: This is true because I think he felt there could be no harm in going ahead on the study of this and there was a period it went through a number of phases. It was in the beginning of '61, '62, and of course early '63 it seemed to be U.S. policy and then in the summer of '63 it seemed to take a dip and then in the summer of '63 it seemed to take a dip and it looked as though we were not so keen on it, and then it was revived again in the latter part of the summer, in the early fall. But perhaps that's a very good illustration of his method in how he handled political matters of this kind, that if he didn't see any strong objection to them, he would go along with them while he was still studying it and then when he made up his mind, he gave it his full support.

SCHELSINGER: Did he talk to you often about Germany?

BOHLEN: Germany, only incidentally in connection with Berlin and there more or less in connection with the Russian thing. I think that he had a certain reservation as to the German future and the danger of German militarism. I think he was very conscious of the possibility that given a few turns or twists of events, you could be headed back into another situation where Germany could again become a menace.

[-37-]

While he was not I would say deeply committed—and how very glad I was to see that too, emotionally—with any country, I think that possibly through the influence of Jacqueline, his wife, he had a certain feeling for France, he liked the quality of French thought, he liked the sort of *élan* and _____ in the audacity of some of the thought, and the kind of cool 18th century quality of French thinking. This I think he found very welcome. He liked the style they put on and things, but I would say he was a man without any deep feeling in regard for any foreign country.

SCHELSINGER: What about foreign—I mean commentators on foreign policy, Joe Alsop and so on?

BOHLEN: Well he knew Joe Alsop very well, you see, and I must say he was extremely masterful in his handling of Joe. I remember going over there for dinner—there were only 8 of us, the Gilpatrics [Roswell L. Gilpatric], the Alsops, the Kennedys, Avis and myself, and we had a talk about the policy toward Laos and while he didn't really say anything different than had been in the papers or around, he did it in such a way that he gave Joe the impression that he was letting him in on...

[END OF TAPE II]

[-38-]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Charles E. Bohlen Oral History Transcript
Name Index

A

Acheson, Dean G., 1, 10
Alphand, Herve, 20
Alphand, Nicole, 20
Alsop, Joseph W., 1, 12, 23, 38
Alsop, Stewart, 1

B

Barnes, Tracy, 13
Bissell, Richard Mervin, Jr., 13
Bohlen, Avis Howard, 20, 38
Bundy, Mary, 20
Bundy, McGeorge, 20

C

Castro, Fidel, 24, 25

D

de Gaulle, Charles A., 3, 9, 10, 20, 21, 22, 27
Donald, David Herbert, 28
Dulles, Allen W., 13

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 18

F

Foster, William C., 18
Friendly, Alfred, 1
Fulbright, J. William, 1

G

Gaitskell, Hugh, 1
Gilpatric, Roswell L., 38

H

Harriman, William Averell, 7

J

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 16

K

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 9, 20, 38
Kennedy, John F., 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14,
15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25,
26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35
Kennedy, Joseph P., 1
Kennedy, Robert F., 28
Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeyeovich, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9,
15, 19, 24, 25, 26

L

Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, 7
Lioux, Marie-Madeline, 20
Lovett, Robert Abercrombie, 32

M

Macmillan, M. Harold, 14, 19
Malraux, André, 20
Marx, Karl, 7

N

Neustadt, Richard E., 30

O

O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 24

R

Rusk, Dean, 24, 25, 33, 34

T

Taylor, Maxwell D., 17
Thompson, Llewellyn "Tommy" E., Jr., 7, 18

W

Wilson, Woodrow, 2