

**Maurice Couve de Murville Oral History Interview—5/20/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Maurice Couve de Murville  
**Interviewer:** Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.  
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**Biographical Note**

Couve de Murville, Minister of Foreign Affairs, France (1958-1968), discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) 1957 speech about Algeria, JFK's 1961 trip to Paris, and the deterioration of Franco-American relations, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Maurice Couve de Murville

May 20, 1964  
Paris, France

By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SCHLESINGER: You met Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] first in the 1950s in Washington?

MURVILLE: Yes, I met him for the first time when I was in Washington as Ambassador—I suppose it was in 1955. I stayed there in '55-'56. I saw him several times and had the opportunity to have several conversations with him.

SCHLESINGER: Did he show any particular interest in France or French problems at that point?

MURVILLE: I would say yes. He was, of course, interested in everything, especially in the field of foreign policy. He seemed to know many things about my country and to be interested in the relations between France and the United States, beginning of course with the question that, at the time, was the most important, I mean decolonization.

SCHLESINGER: Yes, he had been in Indochina and it was then, as now, a tough question.

MURVILLE: Indochina at the time was finished for us, since it was after the Geneva Armistice; our problem

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was mainly Algeria.

SCHLESINGER: His speech about Algeria in 1957—you remember that.

MURVILLE: Yes, I remember that, of course, quite well—I had left Washington at the time, and it reminded me of a conversation I had had with him on the plane between New York and Paris. It happened that we traveled together, and in the morning, when we woke up, we had a talk, especially on this Algerian affair. Of course, he didn't at the time express the same—if I may say—bold ideas which were in the 1957 speech. But his direction was that one certainly, and I can't say that I thought he was completely wrong, even if it was very much in contradiction with French feelings in general at that period.

SCHLESINGER: Did his speech have much impact in France, do you think?

MURVILLE: Yes, certainly, it had a great impact, coming from an important official in the American system—a senator. Of course, everybody in France, when we were in such great difficulty, was very touchy about this Algerian affair and everybody—or rather, many people were very attached to the idea that Algeria was a part of France.

SCHLESINGER: I remember I was in Paris at the time the speech was given, and the full text was printed, I think, in *l'Express* or some similar weekly.

MURVILLE: I can't say. I wasn't there then—I was in Germany—but I remember very well the comments made from many, if not all, quarters.

SCHLESINGER: Were you surprised by the emergence of Kennedy as a presidential possibility, after you left Washington?

MURVILLE: Frankly, I think I should say yes—probably like many people, not in the United States, but in my country. He was a senator, but he was not one of the most prominent ones and then, of course, he was

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very young.

SCHLESINGER: When did you see him next?

MURVILLE: The next time was in Paris in May 1961, when he came to visit General de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] after his election and his inauguration.

SCHLESINGER: Did he seem to have changed from the young senator you had known?

MURVILLE: No, he was exactly the same man. He was a little—four or five years—older, but he still looked very young, very active, very energetic and, above all, I would say, very convinced.

SCHLESINGER: How do you mean, convinced?

MURVILLE: I mean convinced that he was the man of a mission. I mean he took things seriously, he believed in what he said, in what he did. In other words, he really gave the impression—although he was young, young in age and young in office—that he was fully aware of the enormous responsibility he had accepted.

SCHLESINGER: And of the complexity of the problems?

MURVILLE: And of the complexity of the problems, yes, of course—probably more than any normal statesman, because he was at the same time a very keen politician. He was what you call an intellectual. I mean a man who reads, who thinks, and who believes that life is more complicated than it generally appears.

SCHLESINGER: He made a strong impression.

MURVILLE: He made a very strong impression in Paris, certainly, on everybody.

SCHLESINGER: He and President de Gaulle had met briefly in the United States, had they?

MURVILLE: I couldn't answer that question. I'm not sure

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they had met before, and I don't see where they could have met, except, maybe, when General de Gaulle came to Washington in 1960 to pay a State visit to President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower].

SCHLESINGER: As I think about it, I think they did not meet, but that on that occasion President de Gaulle met Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy].

MURVILLE: Yes, that was at the reception at our embassy. Senator Kennedy was not in Washington then, and his wife came.

SCHLESINGER: She, of course, makes a strong impression.

MURVILLE: She made a strong impression, as always, the same impression she made

when she came with her husband to visit us in 1961.

SCHLESINGER: Do you remember anything in particular about the visit in 1961 of President Kennedy?

MURVILLE: What I remember, of course, is the talks that President Kennedy had with my President, and the talks that we all had together, and the general review of the situation that took place on that occasion. It was, of course, very important because it was the first time that we had heard anything of the ideas of the new American President. At that time, the main problems were as always, Berlin and Laos—Laos, which really means Southeast Asia. And then, not as a problem of the moment, but as a lasting essential problem was the question of the defense of the West, which means the problem of the atomic weapons, possession, and—if the case may be—use of the atomic weapons. That was the main question that was discussed by de Gaulle and Kennedy.

SCHLESINGER: At that period—President Kennedy, as you know, had great admiration for President de Gaulle, but sometimes could not understand the positions that the French government took on various matters—at that time, were there indications of future disagreement, or were there fairly composed conversations?

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MURVILLE: There was not agreement on everything, of course. It's true that Kennedy did not always understand de Gaulle's position, but vice-versa—it was true in the other direction. And I think that is completely natural because to really understand another man's position, you must put yourself in his place, which is always difficult. Now, opposition? There was no opposition. I would say there were differences of tendencies—on Berlin, for instance. That was before the building of the Wall across Berlin, but during the crisis of Berlin that began in 1958, with the eternal question of whether one should discuss with the Russians and try to find a solution to the Berlin problem. There was a complete agreement on the substance—that is, that the West must stay in Berlin and, if they were attacked, they must defend themselves. There certainly was a difference on the approach to the problem. The position of General de Gaulle being to say, "Well, we are there; we can't expect our position to be changed or challenged; and that's all that has to be said to the Russians." Kennedy, on the other hand, said, "Well, that's all right, but it's not easy to explain to public opinion; and then, maybe, it would be a good thing to discuss with the Soviets to see whether some kind of arrangements can be made on a practical basis." On defense it was different, of course. It was the eternal problem of things being what they were at that time and what they are still now—that is, the almost absolute predominance in the West of the American atomic power—whether this power will be used, and when, for the defense of Europe—the old question that will be often discussed in the future, also. President Kennedy said that of course it was to be used, that if the Soviets attacked and overwhelmed Europe, or if the Soviets gave the impression that they were threatening the United States, the atomic weapons would be used immediately. De Gaulle said, "Well, it's true, but one can never say when one will finally decide to accept annihilation for defense of other people."

And that's a question that nobody can ever answer. On Laos, of course, it was a little different because it was at the time of the Geneva Conference—it was beginning—and Kennedy had made what I personally had thought to be a very courageous decision—that is, reversing the American policy on Laos, which was a policy of force, trying to strengthen what was called the Rightists against the other side which was, and is still, more or less communist or pro-communist. He accepted our idea, that it would be better to try and find a political solution on the

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basis of neutrality; that was one of the first policy decisions that he had made and, in my mind, it was a very courageous and difficult one.

SCHLESINGER: Was there any talk on this occasion about the future of Europe?

MURVILLE: Not particularly; it was mentioned, of course, but not discussed. No, I think really the main questions were the three I mentioned. There was no conclusion, of course, but I think we can say in general that the spirit was very good; that the two men, Kennedy and de Gaulle, were pleased with the talks and the personal relations they had established; and that it all worked very well. After, Kennedy flew to Vienna for a meeting with Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev].

SCHLESINGER: Yes, he did not stop in Paris on his return.

MURVILLE: No.

SCHLESINGER: He went directly to London.

MURVILLE: Yes.

SCHLESINGER: I know that from the French viewpoint the American policy in Europe has often seemed imprecise and diffuse—I mean not having the kind of classical foreign policy objectives that a country would. On the other hand, as you know, Americans have had a strong feeling about the need for greater political and economic unity in Europe. As Kennedy's policy developed in this, what were your feelings about it?

MURVILLE: It's not easy to answer your question, first of all, because, generally speaking, in the United States, and quite normally, there are two contradictory trends: one is to favor European unity for reasons of common sense, of efficiency, of hope that old battles between European countries are finished forever, and all that; the other trend is that, well, if there is too much of European unity, if it succeeds really, then it can create some new problems for the United States which didn't exist before. And I've only to mention the agricultural problem to show what I mean. Now Kennedy,

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of course, I think, was aware of the two trends and, on the other hand, he was a strong politician, very much conscious of his responsibilities, of the importance and responsibilities of the United States, wanting his country to play its role, which is a first class role in the world, and, therefore, perhaps instinctively or unconsciously inclined, to attach importance to the second trend. I think that's how we considered the American policy in those years which led to the British candidacy to the Common Market and the crisis of the beginning of 1963.

SCHLESINGER: When did you next see President Kennedy after Paris?

MURVILLE: It was very soon after, in October 1961 when we—I mean the N.A.T.O. [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] countries—were in New York for the United Nations and we were invited to go to Washington to meet your President. We had a lunch with him at the White House and, of course, it was mainly devoted to a discussion on Berlin. A discussion on Berlin with the same topics on both sides, I would say, whether it's good or whether it's bad to negotiate or to offer to negotiate with the Russians. What I tried to stress was the importance of giving the Russians no illusions on what would be our reaction if they attempted anything against our rights in Berlin and against, of course, our communications. I must say that President Kennedy was very much of the same opinion, and he was already preparing decisions to reinforce the American forces in Europe in order to make that quite clear to the Soviets.

SCHLESINGER: Yes, and he had already increased the defense budget by that point.

MURVILLE: Yes, you sent reinforcements to Europe, both in materiel and in personnel. You had another division, I think, which, of course, played a big role in the development of that crisis.

SCHLESINGER: Did you have any opportunity then for private conversation with him?

MURVILLE: No, not at that time. The next opportunity was the following year in 1962, in October, I think.

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I was there again because the United Nations General Assembly was meeting. The discussion was mainly on the Berlin affair, always on the question of negotiation, and then on the question of the so-called contingency plans which had been prepared to take care of any incident in Berlin or around Berlin.

SCHLESINGER: This was before Cuba.

MURVILLE: It was before the Cuban crisis which was a few weeks later, if I

remember correctly, of that same year.

SCHLESINGER: Berlin, then, was the main subject. When did you next see the President?

MURVILLE: Yes, Berlin was at the time the main subject, and it was just before the Cuban affair, just before you discovered the presence of atomic missiles in Cuba.

SCHLESINGER: Was there any belief in Paris that firmer action should have been taken when the Wall was being built in those few days in August?

MURVILLE: It's always a little difficult to answer that kind of question afterwards, especially a long time afterwards, because it's too easy to remake history according to what has happened since. I would say in the days the things happened we were thinking, I believe I can say, that it might have been better to have an immediate reaction against the Wall; it would have been better from every point of view and maybe the Russians would have withdrawn. But I'm a little reluctant to say that because there's nothing to prove it and it's so long afterward that....

SCHLESINGER: When was your next meeting?

MURVILLE: The next meeting was in May 1963 after the N.A.T.O. Conference in Ottawa. I flew to Washington to talk with your Secretary of State and to visit your President.

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SCHLESINGER: This was, of course, after the exclusion, the veto, of Great Britain.

MURVILLE: Yes, that was after the break in the negotiations. At that time Kennedy's main preoccupation was the dollar situation.

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

MURVILLE: And half of our talk was devoted to that problem. It happens that, in the old times, I was more or less a financial, or monetary, expert and have some ideas on the subject. I explained to President Kennedy what I thought of the situation of the dollar and what I would do if I had the responsibility—and that was very far from the American policy and President Kennedy's thinking because it started with revaluation of the gold and the complete abolition of what is called the gold exchange standard. It is very far from official thinking both in the United States, in France, and in most of Europe.

SCHLESINGER: How good was his grasp of the technical details, in your mind, of international monetary questions?

MURVILLE: Well, he tried to understand. But clearly he didn't have an economic training, and it was difficult for him to really understand what is at the basis of the monetary system of the modern world. It was difficult for him to understand that not everything depends on the decision by the government, but that the existence of a market implies certain rules, and the consequences of the rules are automatic. The simplest rule, of course, being the law of supply and demand.

SCHLESINGER: Did he discuss the European economic situation, Common Market, et cetera?

MURVILLE: Yes, we discussed the European economic situation which he found very good, maybe a little too good and, of course, we discussed somewhat the so-called Kennedy Round and, of course, also the agricultural policy on both sides, which was beginning to be a cause of headache for your people.

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SCHLESINGER: Did he ask you any questions about economic planning in France?

MURVILLE: No.

SCHLESINGER: Because he was quite interested in...

MURVILLE: No, he didn't mention that. What was discussed after that, of course, was again the nuclear problem. In May 1963, we were a few months after the Nassau Conference and the beginning of the birth of the Atomic Multilateral Force. I tried to explain the reasons why we had not accepted the Nassau offer and why we were not interested in the so-called Multilateral Force and, of course, that was, at the time, a very touchy problem.

SCHLESINGER: What was his manner during these problems involving rather serious disagreement?

MURVILLE: His manner was always the same. It was very simple; it was very direct, not hesitating to say things as they were, always friendly and calm; and it was really very easy to discuss with him. It was easy, in particular, to have an objective discussion. I mean exchanging arguments and the arguments being accepted on both sides.

SCHLESINGER: I think that's so. He had great objectivity of mind.

MURVILLE: Yes, and then a man of great authority, of course, but at the same time of goodwill, trying to understand and to see how things could be settled or

arranged. The conclusion of our talk at the time, on his part, was that he didn't see why there were so many talks of vital disagreements between the United States and France and that maybe the differences were not really so substantial as people say in general.

SCHLESINGER: Did you see him again?

MURVILLE: Yes, I saw him again, and that was the last time, in October of the same year. That was just a

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month and a half before the assassination. I had come to Washington because Franco-American relations at that time had really deteriorated, and it was necessary to have a frank explanation on both sides on what were the feelings and policies and the trends of mind.

SCHLESINGER: What accounted for the deterioration between April and October?

MURVILLE: Well, a number of reasons. The first one, of course, being the break in negotiations between Great Britain and the Common Market which, in the United States, was felt as a blow to American interests. Then, of course, there was the atomic discussion about the Nassau offer, which had been rejected by the French—by General de Gaulle. Then, of course, there was the conclusion of the treaty of cooperation between France and Germany which had been considered in Washington as directed against the United States—I don't know why. And then there was the Indochinese affair beginning again. General de Gaulle had made a statement in August about Vietnam and expressed the opinion that a solution of the Vietnamese affair could be found only on the basis of independence and neutrality.

SCHLESINGER: The first three of those events had taken place actually before April.

MURVILLE: Yes, that's quite right. But you know how things are in life and in international affairs—they develop slowly. And it was only progressively that everything appeared as a big crisis between France and the United States.

SCHLESINGER: How was the President at this meeting?

MURVILLE: I would say he was very friendly and, as usual, very objective—trying to find out what wasn't going well and how ways could be found to get out of the difficulties.

SCHLESINGER: Do you think he had—this was the last time you saw him—changed much in his presidency or was he still much as he was when he came to

Paris in 1961?

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MURVILLE: As a man, he was exactly the same, of course; as a President, he had certainly changed, having more assurance, more experience. He had been there for over two years. But he always gave the same impression of thinking mainly of his big responsibilities. He certainly was more precise, more assured than at the beginning, when we saw him the first time in May 1961.

SCHLESINGER: He remained puzzled by the discrepancy between what seemed to him to be the serious issues between France and the United States and the tone of the relationship.

MURVILLE: Yes, certainly that was one of the comments that he made. And I would say that, on this side of the Atlantic, we agreed completely with him because, as he himself, we couldn't understand why everything had become so passionate and how it was so difficult to understand the respective positions.

SCHLESINGER: Do you have any reflections of your own as to how this condition developed—the passion?

MURVILLE: Of course, as always, nobody's alone in the world, and the United States and France are not alone either. Other countries can have an influence on their relations or on the way they think about their relations. Then, of course, it is a fact of life now that everything is made public—that everything comes out in the press and the radio and that everybody aims at sensationalism. So when anything happens, it generally comes to the worst because everybody wants to find the worst in it.

SCHLESINGER: Given the fact that countries like France and the United States are going to pursue their own national interests and national concerns, do you think that this condition of disagreement or discord between France and the United States was inevitable, or could the United States, for example, have pursued another policy equally in defense of its interests, which would have averted this?

MURVILLE: To suppose there are no difficulties in international life is to suppose that human nature is

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perfect. How can you imagine that, when people are not of the same opinion, they don't look as if they were in opposition or even adversaries? I think, in the case of Franco-American relations, President Kennedy was very well aware of the fact that things were changing. He was still a young man. I mean he was more in the future than in the past, and therefore he understood quite well that relations between Europe and the United States

were not the same as they were fifteen, ten, or even five years before. Now to reconcile that with the position of the United States was not easy, and that's what he tried to do— understanding that there was something to arrange in order to adapt to new circumstances, and at the same time having a very acute sense of the place and the responsibilities of the United States in the world and especially in the Western world.

SCHLESINGER: I gather the test ban treaty did not come up in your talks.

MURVILLE: No, the test ban treaty was signed in August 1963

SCHLESINGER: Had France by October decided not to...

MURVILLE: Oh, yes. But, you see, that wasn't discussed because it was really not worthwhile discussing. I mean there wasn't anything to do about it.

SCHLESINGER: How did you hear about President Kennedy's death?

MURVILLE: In this office. And it came very quickly, as you know, because there was first the news of the aggression, and then a few minutes afterwards the news that people were not sure he wasn't dead, and then it was confirmed.

SCHLESINGER: You don't know how the news came to President de Gaulle?

MURVILLE: In exactly the same way. The moment I learned it, I called him. And he was already informed by the same way, that is the press agencies.

SCHLESINGER: Did he say anything memorable?

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MURVILLE: He didn't say anything memorable—I don't remember that—but he was very impressed and, I would say, very distressed because he had a very high esteem and consideration and, I would add, friendship for President Kennedy, who was certainly very popular in this country—there's no question about that.

SCHLESINGER: As you know, President Kennedy was very hopeful that President de Gaulle would come to the United States.

MURVILLE: Yes, and it was almost arranged. I mean it was almost decided that the two men would meet in the beginning of 1964—it was to be in February or the beginning of March, I think. And then, of course, it turned in another direction.

SCHLESINGER: On the question of Southeast Asia, in your last conversations with

President Kennedy, did this arise?

MURVILLE: Yes, it did arise because, as I said, General de Gaulle had made a statement on the Vietnamese affair which really expressed a very objective opinion on his part, but which was at the time, and due to the circumstances, probably taken as a criticism of American policy. President Kennedy mentioned that and discussed it with me. I tried to explain that it was nothing against American policy, but that it was really our feeling—and still is, by the way. But of course the Vietnamese crisis was not as acute as it has become since, and I would say, on the other hand, that I never found Kennedy in those Southeast affairs sure of what was the direction to be taken. He made, as I said, a very courageous decision on Laos, changing all the policy of his country, and certainly he was thinking about the Vietnamese development and wondering what would be the best to be done.

SCHLESINGER: Yes, I think that's right. I think he inherited a number of commitments which he might not necessarily have made himself and some of which he could revise. How do you account for the fact that Kennedy, who was President of the United States for three years, which is a very short time, nevertheless had such an impact on the world

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as judged by the outpouring of grief at his death more than any American death since Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]?

MURVILLE: I think, you can explain that by two facts. First, of course, is the personality of the man, beginning with his youth; and then he was handsome; then he was sympathetic. He was elected to the surprise of many people because no one knew him very well before, and it was a very close election. So that attracted attention. Then, when he came to power, everybody was wondering what this young man would do. That was, I think, one thing. The other is that as he was young, as he was active, as he was highly responsible, his attitude was very different from that of his predecessor. His predecessor was much older, full of past and glory, certainly less active. So there was a change in American policy—not in the fundamental attitudes, of course, but there was a change in the way of operating, and it made an impression on public opinion. I think that all that played a role—plus, of course, this sense of history that Kennedy seemed to have very deeply inside himself and which made an impression on the people also.

SCHLESINGER: I take it that, on de Gaulle's as on Kennedy's side, the differences between them on policy did not lead to personal resentments.

MURVILLE: Oh, no, not at all. I think that, on the contrary, there was on both sides a high degree of esteem and appreciation and, as I said, friendship.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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