

**William Averell Harriman Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 01/17/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** William Averell Harriman  
**Interviewer:** Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.  
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**Biographical Note**

Harriman was the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, 1943 to 1946, and to the United Kingdom for a short while in 1946; the Secretary of Commerce from 1946 to 1948; the governor of New York, 1955 to 1959; Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs from 1961 to 1963; Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, 1963 to 1965; the chief American negotiator at the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty discussions in Moscow, 1963, and the Vietnam peace negotiations in Paris, 1968 and 1969; and an adviser to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy [JFK], and Lyndon B. Johnson. In this interview Harriman discusses his position in the State Department as a roving ambassador, including his flexibility in making decisions in the field, and traveling around the world; JFK's conception of the Soviet Union; interactions with Souvanna Phouma and changes in general opinion of him; evaluating options for American action or intervention in Laos; the international meeting in Geneva over Laos, including dealing with the Soviet negotiator George M. Pushking and with the Chinese; comparing JFK and Roosevelt in their respective administration of the State Department; and the Joint Chiefs' attitude towards Laos and the concept of limited commitment, among other issues.

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*A. Rowell Harriman*

Date:

*Jan. 19<sup>th</sup> 1973*

William Averell Harriman – JFK #2  
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Second Oral History Interview

With

WILLIAM AVERELL HARRIMAN

January 17, 1965  
Washington, D.C.

By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SCHLESINGER: How did the matter of the roving ambassadorship first come up?

HARRIMAN: Well, there was some talk with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], and with Dean Rusk, I think, and also Bill Walton [William Walton], about what I might do after he decided to select Dean Rusk as Secretary of State. I remember having a talk with Dean Rusk. He was wondering whether he had to take it, and I of course told him that it wasn't possible to refuse a President an offer of this kind. He had, naturally, some financial problems which were difficult for him to arrange. Then later on I talked to him about my own position. I had some indication that the President wanted me to do something. And Rusk felt that it might be possible to establish a position of minister of state, to do some of the traveling and attend some of the meetings which he felt had taken too much

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of Dulles's [John Foster Dulles] time. I remember suggesting to him that it would be better to have me as an ambassador-at-large; that the term "ambassador" could mean, depending on who the man was, a personal representative of the President, and it could be built up into any position that the President and he wanted it to be; whereas you would probably have to get some sort of legislation for a special job of Minister of State and it was better to try it this

other way. I remember talking to the President about it at Palm Beach [Florida]. I went to Hobe Sound [Florida] and drove over to Palm Beach, and we had a talk about it. He seemed to be quite satisfied that the job of Ambassador-At-Large was what he would like. He felt he'd like me to be available for use wherever my particular experience would be of value. We naturally talked about the Russian situation, and he knew that I'd had long experience in that field. One interesting thing about this is that when I was finally appointed and I started to discuss with Dean Rusk what I should do, he said, "Now I want you to be sure to go to these different international meetings because I don't want to have to travel. There will be so much work to be done here at home." Now the first meeting that came up was the SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] meeting. I think that was at Bangkok [Thailand], and he told me he was going to this. He said, "I am going to just this one." I said, "Well, Dean, if you go to this

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one you'll go to them all." And of course that's what happened.

SCHLESINGER: Do you have any particular recollection of the meeting of ambassadors—with Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen], Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson, Jr.], Kennan [George F. Kennan] and the President on the Soviet Union?

HARRIMAN: Yes, there was a meeting at which there was some discussion about the Soviet Union, and some of the details of what was discussed aren't very clear in my mind. I know the President asked a number of questions, and we each of us answered them. I remember I had received some personal messages directly from Mr. Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] which were conveyed to me through the Soviet Ambassador Menshikov [Mikhail A. Menshikov], which in general indicated his gratification at the election of President Kennedy. (Of course, you remember he didn't think much of Nixon [Richard M. Nixon].) There was some indication that he (Khrushchev) felt this (the election of Kennedy) would mean that we could find methods of resolving some of our differences. He indicated some willingness on his part, and I think I was in a mood to see that these were explored. I think the subject of the President meeting Khrushchev came up and I think I was in favor of it, but I do believe that I indicated there ought to be some preliminary talks in order to see or find out what the major differences would be before the men met. I remember that was my feeling about it just

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prior to the Vienna meeting. I felt that that meeting had been arranged without proper consultation on a high level in order to be prepared for it. Of course you never can fully prepare for a meeting at the summit. I think that one of the reasons why there was such a clear-cut confrontation there between the two men was that neither side had knowledge before they met of the firm views that each held on the particular subjects that were discussed.

SCHLESINGER: Did you get any impression from that session with Kennedy or from other sessions of his conception of the Soviet Union and of communism?

HARRIMAN: Well, I think he had a very clear conception of the Soviet Union and communism. He of course had never dealt on this level with them, but he recognized the basic and fundamental difference between us—their desire to communize the world, and our desire to frustrate them in these designs. At the same time, there was a difference between those basic communist ideological objectives and the political situations that we had to deal with, such as the problems of Berlin and the problems of Southeast Asia which fell into a political category. And also he had very much in mind the necessity of having a military establishment which would make the Russians understand that they couldn't play fast and loose with the United States. He was already developing the idea that we had to have conventional forces as well as

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nuclear forces. He had repudiated the concept of massive retaliation, and he recognized, I think, that military action might come in a field in which it would be impossible to use nuclear weapons and where the West would have to have adequate conventional forces in order to prevent an escalation, in addition to which conventional forces would act as a deterrent. This related not only to the problems in Germany and Berlin but also in other parts of the world. He was immediately confronted, of course, with the problems in Laos because of the military action that was going on at that time and because the government we were then supporting was being beaten militarily.

SCHLESINGER: At the end of February you left on a round-the-world fact-finding tour in which you spent three days in Laos, in March as I recall. Was Laos part of this tour?

HARRIMAN: No, there were two different missions. The first one was undertaken because the President and Dean Rusk felt that it would be well to sound out the attitudes of some of the governments and to report back in order that they could begin to formulate their policies. I didn't go to Laos and Southeast Asia on that trip. On that trip—it was late February or March, I think—but in this first trip I went to London to talk to Macmillan [M. Harold Macmillan], and then I went to Paris. Incidentally, I cut the London trip short because I had word the President wanted me to go and represent him at the funeral

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of the Moroccan King [Mohammed V, King of Morocco]. Then I went back to Paris, saw de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle]; went on to Bonn and saw Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer]; went to Rome, spent a couple of days there and saw the Prime Minister [Amintore Fanfani] and the President [Giovanni Gronchi] and a number of members of the Cabinet. They were enormously interested. All of these men that I saw were enormously interested in what was

going on. They had been very much taken by the President's [Kennedy] speeches and felt that there was a new personality that had come into the world and that there was a new force and new vigor. They wanted to understand it, and I was able, I think, to give them some indication of the policies which President Kennedy had in mind. They reacted—even President de Gaulle at that time—reacted very favorably. The Italians, of course, were particularly friendly.

Then I was asked to go on to India. Bowles [Chester B. Bowles], who was then Undersecretary, couldn't get to the ECAFE meeting—Economic Commission for the Far East. I was asked to go on there and then, in that connection, it was decided that I should call on the Shah [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran] en route, and see Nehru [Jawaharlal Nehru] and come back through Pakistan and see President Ayub Khan [Mohammad Ayub Khan].

I found that in India the President's [Kennedy] statements had enormous effect. Of course, India was still smarting under

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the remarks that Dulles had made about neutralism being immoral, and the President's prior positions in regard to India, but particularly his speeches had given them the feeling that there was a new sympathetic understanding of India's problems, and the attitude towards the United States was changed materially. Of course, Pakistan was very friendly—General Ayub—and he looked forward keenly to association with the new Administration. The Shah naturally hoped very much for personal relationship with the President. He placed a great deal of stock on personal relations. Each one of them, of course, had their particular needs and requirements and desires. The Shah's as always, is to have more airplanes to play with on the basis of the security requirements. I naturally put forward the conceptions of social reform, land reform, educational reform, and other projects which were in the mind of President Kennedy as part of our international objectives. But then—going to the Far East, that was a different time. The Secretary of...

SCHLESINGER: When you went to New Delhi [India].... As I understand it you were in Laos at the end of March and again...

HARRIMAN: No, no. I only went once to Laos. I stopped at New Delhi. I didn't go further east.

SCHLESINGER: Did you see Souvanna Phouma on this trip?

HARRIMAN: Let me see. No, I think I saw Souvanna Phouma on the next trip. Did I try to see him when I was in India that time?

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SCHLESINGER: Well, according to the newspapers, some account I have, you saw him either in New Delhi or in Paris. This may have been in April rather than in



March.

HARRIMAN: I will have to check that.\*

I know—I have a vague feeling that the first time I saw Souvanna Phouma was in Phnom Penh [Cambodia] in April. I did have a talk with him in New Delhi. I can't remember what the date of that was. But let me go on and hold this in abeyance. I later—I think it was in April after I had come back and reported—in April there was a meeting.... I must say before I go on that in each one of these capitals there was enormous interest not only in the press and the people but on the part of the government in understanding and trying to get some conception of this new political figure that had appeared from the United States. I remember particularly in Italy for the three days I was there, the newspapers had what I was doing on the front page and on the third page, and pictures on the eleventh page. You would think that the whole government had stopped doing business. Of course, Italy had been.... Italy's political objectives have always been to work very closely with the United States. But the same in a different way was true of each one of the countries that I went to. Now when...

SCHLESINGER: You weren't involved in Laos until you came back?

HARRIMAN: No, I didn't have anything to do with Laos that time. There was one time I saw him in Delhi but that was, I think

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a different time. I remember getting on the plane with Dean Rusk to go to the CENTO [Central Treaty Organization] meeting in Ankara, Turkey, sometime in April. He asked me to come along as he wasn't sure whether he could remain the full period of the meeting, and he thought it would be probable that he would go to the meeting and stay a day, open it up, and leave it for me to handle. When we got on the plane he said, "Now we have been working on this Laos meeting—the conference on Laos which is going to take place in May, we hope, and I think it might be a good idea for you to go on and take a trip to Laos and get a sense of what's going on." This was rather bad luck—that he mentioned this *after* we got aboard the plane because I had no tropical clothes of any kind, shape, or description and was only equipped to take care of the rather bleak spring weather in Ankara.

I remember going down to the PX [Post Exchange] and fortunately I found one suit, a light suit, thin rather, that I could wear, and I immediately left and went to Laos. I thought as long as I was going to Laos I'd better stop at each of the countries. I went to Laos; I went to Saigon [Vietnam]; I went to Phnom Penh; I went to Bangkok [Thailand]; stopped at Delhi again because, of course, the Indians were the chairmen of the International Control Commission. I saw Mr. Nehru again. I remember that on that trip I was away from

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\* William Averell Harriman (March 7, 1978): As I recall it, I met Souvanna Phouma for the first time on my first visit to New Delhi at the suggestion of a senior official of the Foreign Office who invited us both to have tea with him informally at his home.

Washington eleven nights. I spent four of those nights on the planes and the other seven in different capitals.

SCHLESINGER: This was when?

HARRIMAN: This was the end of April. In Laos I spent one night in Vientiane and one in Luang Prabang. I tried to arrange to see Souvanna Phouma while I was on that trip. The French Ambassador undertook to try to arrange it, and he agreed to meet me in Phnom Penh on the one day I was there. Unfortunately, bad weather prevented his arrival. So when I went down to the airplane the next morning—I was on such a tight schedule I couldn't wait over and I wasn't even sure that he would arrive—I was told that his plane had just landed and he was in the VIP waiting room. So I went in there and was introduced to him, and we had a talk about the objectives.

I think I should say here that President Kennedy when he came into office was faced with three alternatives. One was to let Laos fall into the hands of the communists. The government forces that the government and we were supporting were being beaten. They were retreating under the pressure from the Pathet Laos—the combination of the forces of the neutralists—the Pathet Lao supported by the North Vietnamese. If we hadn't intervened in some way, they would have been in Vientiane and they would have taken the country over. And that looked as if it would be a communist takeover. The second alternative was to introduce a large American expeditionary force to hold the line. Or the third was to attempt

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to work out some plan for neutralization which would permit Laos to live their own lives without any interference from either side. The President decided to go that route, but unfortunately it was very difficult to get the communists, the neutralists, and the Pathet Lao to stop fighting because they were gaining.

The President asked General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer] who was then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to go out, and I happened to be there at the time. I met him in Saigon. The telegram I sent from Vientiane, I think, said that I felt there was not much chance of getting a ceasefire unless there was some show of force. I thought consideration should be given to indication of a willingness on the part of the United States, with or without SEATO—preferably with SEATO—to support the government—not with the idea of using force to suppress the uprising but as a basis for insuring a ceasefire. I had the feeling that a relatively small force stationed in Vientiane would have been sufficient.

SCHLESINGER: How large a force?

HARRIMAN: Well, I didn't know how large a force. Lemnitzer felt the same way, and the next day he sent a telegram which is on record, which I approved, which conformed in a general way to the message that I sent. By the time we got home—by the time I got home—a ceasefire had been agreed to, and therefore the recommendations that General Lemnitzer made and I

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made were no longer applicable.

SCHLESINGER: But you and Lemnitzer agreed on a limited force?

HARRIMAN: My idea was very clear and I think it was the same as Lemnitzer's although the size of the forces may not have been exactly the same. I didn't recommend a specific force. But a small force put into Vientiane and possibly one or two other cities would be sufficient to stop the advance and such a warning to the communists that they would stop their advance. This was not an idea that we would go in there and start an offensive to clear the country of the communists at all. It was a defensive move. But as I say, this came—this recommendation came just at the time a ceasefire had been accepted—at least in principle. I think May 3 was set as the date of the meeting, the fourteen-nation meeting in Geneva [Switzerland]. Secretary Rusk agreed to go and start the meeting as did the British Foreign Secretary [Home of the Hirsell, Alec Douglas-Home, Baron] and Gromyko [Andrei A. Gromyko] and that it should be kept on a high level. Therefore he asked me to stay and handle the negotiations rather than have it descend to a normal ambassadorial level. It was agreed that it had descended to an ambassadorial level—I would retire, and I think they first thought that this man who was Ambassador in—who was going to Bangkok, would take it on?

SCHLESINGER: Young [Kenneth T. Young].

HARRIMAN: Young. But he had to go to Bangkok and so he never appeared on the scene.

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SCHLESINGER: Did you have any conversations with the President before you went to Geneva?

HARRIMAN: I don't recall. I'm sure that I saw him because we all saw him and discussed the position. He had constantly indicated that he had no desire to become involved militarily in Laos. He didn't feel that it was either the place or the time to have a major confrontation with the communists. Of course, in that I fully agreed. I had only felt that we had to have, and we would be in a better negotiating position if we had had, a small force there as an indication that the United States was ready to back up its diplomatic positions, its political positions with force.

SCHLESINGER: Did you have any impression of his reaction to that idea?

HARRIMAN: No, because our telegrams came in while I was still away and I wasn't at any meeting in which he attended. I think they were put aside. I don't

think they were ever seriously considered because the agreement was reached—the communist side and the neutralist side agreed to have a ceasefire. We were insisting, of course, that we wouldn't go to any meeting unless there was a ceasefire, and that was one of the major issues which hit us at the time we were at the meeting because there was certain fighting that continued throughout May, and we refused to discuss anything else. The first major issue that came up was one of the Pathet Lao—whether there would be three representatives of the Laotians:

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the government forces who were the conservative side and the neutralists, Souvanna Phouma, who had the support of the Pathet Lao. The British unfortunately had agreed in Moscow that the three so-called political tendencies should be represented. We objected to that strenuously but Secretary Rusk decided that we had to give in on that point. Before he left, he told Home that we would be willing to accept it. After his agreeing to accept it, of course, the government, General Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] and Prince Boun Oum [Boun Oum, Prince of Laos], who was the Prime Minister, refused to sit down with the Pathet Lao, so there was very considerable confusion for a period of time, and during that time the Pathet Lao and neutralists forces continued to advance against some of the Meo tribesmen who were fighting with the government forces.

SCHLESINGER: What finally happened? How was the issue resolved?

HARRIMAN: I think the record will show that eventually the three of them got together in Laos and agreed to have the Laotian representation with the three participating together. It was a compromise, and it was their method of reaching an agreement. I have forgotten the exact details but I think they agreed to come as one team but with the three parties on that team.

SCHLESINGER: How long did Rusk stay in Geneva?

HARRIMAN: Oh, he only stayed a few days. The principal action that he

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took was that of agreeing to seating the Pathet Lao. He did that without consultation with me, and I thought he gave in rather too soon. I thought that it put us behind the eight ball right off the bat. I think we'd have been better off to have held that up, but I don't know just what we would have gained if we had. We were in a very weak position to negotiate because of the military situation in Laos, and we had very little to negotiate with. The communists took full advantage of that, and, therefore, we had to be doubly firm on our political positions that we took throughout the discussions.

SCHLESINGER: Pushkin [George M. Pushkin] was the Soviet negotiator?

HARRIMAN: Pushkin was the Soviet negotiator. He made it fairly clear that they were quite pleased that they had a position in Southeast Asia. He said that never before had any Russian been in Southeast Asia until the autumn before when they began to support—after General Phoumi threw Souvanna out of Vientiane and started to march north—they supported the neutralists. Souvanna turned to the Russians—the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao and the Russians when the decision was reached in September for General Phoumi to march his forces north. This was aided and abetted by the representative of the Pentagon who was out there then, Assistant Secretary of Defense—I’ve forgotten what his name was [John N. Irwin, II]—and I thought that was one of the great mistakes that was made.

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SCHLESINGER: Also by Jeff Parsons [J. Graham Parsons].

HARRIMAN: I don’t know what the position of the State Department was because I haven’t been able to find out, but I do know that Ambassador Brown [Winthrop G. Brown] was opposed to this action and I do know that this Assistant Secretary of Defense was out there. He had the job Paul Nitze [Paul H. Nitze] took, do you remember?

SCHLESINGER: Yes. I can’t remember....

HARRIMAN: And he was all for marching up there (to Vientiane). The CIA had been very active. The general attitude of the previous Administration as expressed by Foster Dulles was that Laos should be made “a bastion of Western strength.” Well, anybody who knew Laos knew that you couldn’t make it a bastion of anything—let alone Western strength right up against the communist border. We could have had a neutralist government anytime from 1954 on. Souvanna Phouma had been Prime Minister two or three times. He was not sufficiently amenable to the Defense, CIA, and the State Department. He was independent, and they were afraid that he would fall under the influence of the Pathet Lao. As things turned out, as we have seen, Souvanna Phouma has been very vigorous in his determination to resist the communists. He has been in a weaker position since 1962 when he took over the prime ministership, and he has been very vigorous and very determined to hold out against the Pathet Lao.

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SCHLESINGER: Is he a man of ability?

HARRIMAN: He certainly is a man of ability. I think he is the only man—I became convinced that he was the only man and I think it has been proved the fact—that he is the only man who can hold the country together. The others are so clearly involved in one faction or another, and, as I say, it was a big tragedy that he wasn’t supported by the United States. In fact, not only was he not supported by the

United States, but, as I understand it, the United States connived to throw him out. And General Phoumi was generally a creature of the—I don't want to put this in print, but General Phoumi was selected and supported by the CIA with a view to his taking a leading role in the events in Laos. I can't imagine why anybody thought that they could resist the Pathet Lao without very large American intervention. Laos is right up against North Vietnam, right up against China. The reinforcement of the Pathet Lao from Communist China and Communist North Vietnam was so obvious that it seems a fantastic conception that we could have supported a rightwing government there which was interpreted by the Chinese and the North Vietnamese as a threat against them. But that was during a period when Foster Dulles thought neutrality was immoral and he wanted to have everybody choose up sides. In any event, this was the kind of situation that President Kennedy was faced with.

SCHLESINGER: Did you meet General Phoumi?

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HARRIMAN: Oh, yes! I met General Phoumi...

SCHLESINGER: What was he like?

HARRIMAN: ...on many an occasion. He is a very stubborn fellow. I have very little respect for his stubbornness. And I think those were qualities which were interpreted by those who supported him as indications that he had—that he was a real fighter. But his troops wouldn't fight at all, in spite of the fact we had some splendid White Star teams out there advising them. I remember the remark of one of the—it was reported of one of our officers who was with the battalion that had been sent up to try to defend Pnom Tha, which was the last place that fell in 1962 when the ceasefire was broken again, and he remarked that his battalion showed a great improvement since the last engagement. The last engagement, when they were attacked by the North Vietnamese, they threw down their arms and ran; this time they carried their weapons with them. [Laughter] This is laughable in a sense, but how in the world anybody in the Pentagon could have considered that an army of this kind could possibly stand up against organized, trained opposition. I think they perhaps could have stood up against the Pathet Lao, but they couldn't.... Whenever there were some forces of the North Vietnamese—they were dressed in black uniforms and came in as the Chinese do, yelling, the Lao ran. Then usually,

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they retired and let the Pathet Lao troops into the village.

SCHLESINGER: By April 1961 was the Pentagon still arguing?

HARRIMAN: No, as soon as President Kennedy came in, as far as I could see, they were ready to carry out anything the President wanted. The only

recommendation that I was involved in was the recommendation that General Lemnitzer made which was for a very limited force, in order to hold the line. Now there had been and there were continually a number of discussions as to what might be done if the ceasefire failed and the military plans were made with the support of SEATO, but it became very evident that the major strength in any military intervention from the outside or military support from the outside had to be practically or very largely with American forces, both ground forces as well as air. And there were varying estimates made and differences of opinion expressed as to the size of the military establishment which would be needed. There were so many estimates made of this that I can't recall the order in which they were made.

But there was never any great desire on the part of the military to put in American forces. They recognized they could only be supplied by air, and they were always fearful that the Chinese might pour in substantial troops from the North and the Vietnam and they would be tied down for endless fighting in the jungle without any end to the affair. After all we'd seen the situation develop in Korea and no one was

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very keen to see that type of situation recur. Obviously Laos would not have been the place that our military would have selected as the battlefield with the communists in Southeast Asia.

SCHLESINGER: Do you remember any discussion of the use of tactical nuclear weapons?

HARRIMAN: No. I wasn't involved in any discussion of tactical nuclear weapons. There wasn't any discussion of that at all, that I was involved in. Now there was a meeting.... We adjourned the session while the President went to Vienna to meet Khrushchev. And there was some little boost and feeling when one subject the President and Khrushchev agreed upon—granted it was in general terms, but there was an agreement that both the United States and the Soviet Union would work for a neutral and independent Laos. After we came together again, however, we began to get into the details of discussions and we had endless arguments about every single provision. I was very firm on the insistence that there had to be an agreement that the foreign troops were to be withdrawn; that Laos was not to be used as a corridor to carry men and materials from North Vietnam to South Vietnam; and it took months and months to negotiate that out. I remember one time returning to Washington and there were some discussions about what was going on, and we had a talk with the President, and he indicated that he was ready to accept Souvanna Phouma

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with the proper surroundings, and he called me up afterwards. I think I have a record of the conversation in which he wanted to make sure that I understood that he wanted an independent Laos. I don't know what motivated his calling me because I was fully in the same mood. But, although it was quite clear to me, there were certain people that had not accepted the kind of settlement that we had to make—were not willing to accept Souvanna Phouma; wanted to see if we couldn't find somebody else or didn't understand that if you

had Souvanna Phouma as a Prime Minister—you couldn't run Souvanna Phouma. There were all sorts of ideas in the Pentagon and in the State Department that we could have some kind of an arrangement by which Phoumi would really be in charge and Souvanna would be his front man. Well that was quite impossible. I met Souvanna, I think in mid-September, in Rangoon [Burma]. And we had, I think, three days' talk, went into a great many details—we've got a full record of that conversation.

But I made up my mind that we could deal with him, but there couldn't be any two ways about it. If we were going to back him we had to back him; and by that time I had lost confidence in General Phoumi and, yet, we were handicapped in negotiations by the lingering desire on the part of certain people—I don't know who they were—to try to force the acceptance of provisions which just wouldn't work. I think

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you can clearly see that, if you are going to back a man who is Prime Minister, he's got to be the boss and you've got to back him. You've got to take that gamble, and my judgment of that, and the President's judgment of that in instructing me to do it, has been proved to be right, because Souvanna has stood out and has stood up. We've had more difficulties from the conservative side than we had from Souvanna. Of course, the greatest difficulty has been from the Pathet Lao on the communist side who haven't lived up to it at all. They never took their troops out; they never stopped using the corridor; and it seems quite clear that they went into this agreement not thinking that it would work and having no intention of carrying it out. I think they underestimated the courage and determination of Souvanna. I think they probably thought they could run him.

SCHLESINGER: Can you remember when you came to decide that Souvanna was the key to the situation? Was it before Geneva or in the course of it?

HARRIMAN: Well, I took a great deal of trouble to try to find out about him. I talked to a number of the French. I talked to other people who had seen him and knew him. I can't remember all they were. But I made up my mind very early in the game—and particularly after my long talks with him—and the Indians felt that way about it but I discounted their opinion because they were strongly for neutralists. But after my

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talks with him in mid-September I became satisfied that that was the gamble we had to take and that there was no alternative to it except I had been studying this situation in 1960 because I thought things were going very badly in Laos, and I had talked with some of my French friends up in the United Nations. Pierre Millet [Pierre G. L. Millet] had told me something of his background; he knew the family, his wife the princess who was half French and half Laotian. They, of course, believed in him. So, I had some background of opinion about him which gradually developed into a feeling that this was the only—this was a gamble we had to take and we were no worse off by taking it than if we tried to get the



impossible or have the negotiations break down. But President Kennedy made it very plain to me when he called me on the telephone<sup>\*\*</sup> that he wanted me to get an agreement; one that, of course, had a chance of working, but that he didn't see—he was quite ready to abandon the idea of the United States dominating the Laos situation.

Now, actually, what happened immediately, after the agreement was signed, was that we were much better off because we were in full support of the neutralists and the rightwing factions whereas the communists were then supporting only the leftwing factions. As it stands today, I suppose three-quarters of the people of the country are under

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the government. It is a de facto partition; it is not a satisfactory solution, but it has held together for two and one-half years? We have the respect of the world on our side. We are not attempting to put in a rightwing faction against the will of what appeared to be the majority of the people, and so politically as well as militarily we are very much better off.

Now one phase of the situation which impressed me was Pushkin's evident determination which indicated that the Russians were going to stay the situation. Now, it could hardly have been Pushkin's own desire because he must have been acting for Khrushchev. But he undertook—and one of the reasons why we finally were able to come to an agreement was that he undertook that the Russians should see that what he called the socialist countries (we called communists) lived up to the agreement, providing the British would see that the other people—the United States and the democratic countries—would live up to their commitment. I don't think he took that idly because it was spoken of so many times with MacDonald [Malcolm John MacDonald] independently to MacDonald, MacDonald and myself present. The British had a good deal of doubt as to whether they wanted to assume responsibility for us. Just what he had in mind in regard to this is very hard to tell. But I know that when I went back to see Mr. Khrushchev in order to find out why he hadn't lived up to this commitment—

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Pushkin unfortunately had died—Khrushchev showed no interest in Laos whatsoever. When I talked to him again in July he wanted to get off the subject. He...

SCHLESINGER: In what year? '62?

HARRIMAN: This was 1963. The first time I went entirely to talk about Laos. The second time it was in connection with the test ban negotiations. He said, "It's time to go to dinner; we haven't got time to talk about Laos. Why do we want to bother with Laos? I have no interest in Laos." I always regretted that Pushkin died, because I was never able to find out just what had happened. It was very clear that the Russians wanted to have a stake in there.

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<sup>\*\*</sup> William Averell Harriman (January 1978): I believe the President called me to make sure I wasn't paying attention to the other opinions in the State Department.

One incident was typical of what affected me. The Chinese had made a very violent attack on the United States for supporting the Boun Oum-Phoumi government. In reply.... I used to have my replies in very low key because I don't believe in shouting at each other in this kind of a meeting. I usually took the point of view that the inaccurate charges made by the group when they talked had done nothing more than to discredit them and state quietly what the facts were—but in this case I did accuse the Chinese for their side of helping the Pathet Lao and helping them several times break the ceasefire. I saw Pushkin the next day, and he said, "You did the Chinese a grave injustice." I asked, "What do you mean?" He said, "They're not helping the Pathet

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Lao. All the arms and ammunition are coming from us." Now there are certain times when you believe what the Russians say. In this case he said this because he was taking a certain pride in the fact that they were the ones, the leading spirits in Laos, and they were the ones that were back of the North Vietnamese and back of the Pathet Lao.

SCHLESINGER: Did he tell you that the airlift was the biggest supply operation...

HARRIMAN: Yes, he told me that when they decided to help Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao against this advancing force of General Phoumi (on Vientiane). He said that never had there been a higher priority given in the Soviet Union to the movement of military equipment from the Soviet Union, of course, through China to Laos by air. Of course, these things he told me later on as we got gossiping. I saw him many times, had meals with him, and gossiped about one thing and another. All of this added together made me feel that they had determined to keep an interest in it.

SCHLESINGER: Keep the Chinese out?

HARRIMAN: Well, I thought it was in order to keep the Chinese from moving south, and Laos was a nice way of.... The Soviets will never appear to be cooperating with us but for the time being at least they were quite ready to use a neutralist Laos as a block to Chinese expansion in that area. Now, I'm sure I'm not wrong in this because Pushkin couldn't have exaggerated—he wouldn't have had the temerity to exaggerate it as

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much as he did. There was no need for his taking the commitment that he took or making the boasts that he did. There must have been a change of policy in '62 and '63. The exact reasons for it are hard to tell. Pushkin, of course, may have had some of his own ambitions in connection with it because he was in charge of foreign affairs for the Far East. But a Russian never does take a position out of whole cloth. He must have had a real basis for it. Now just what changed Khrushchev's attitude is hard to tell. It may have been that the North Vietnamese changed their attitude towards them—may be that the confrontation with China

took a different turn, and you can guess that as well as I can. But historically I think it is a very important matter to try to analyze.

SCHLESINGER: Are the Russians still supplying, or did they continue in '63 to supply the...

HARRIMAN: As far as we know, they are not continuing to supply. This is coming from the North Vietnamese. There are a lot of Russian supplies that are there, but as far as I know—I'll check this—but as far as I know, there hasn't been any assistance to the North Vietnamese for some period of time. Such assistance as they are getting is coming from the Chinese.

SCHLESINGER: Does it look as if the Russians have been sort of maneuvered out of that part of Asia?

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HARRIMAN: Well, either they maneuvered themselves out—but now they seem to be maneuvering in. There is a difference of opinion about this, but it looks to me as if, since Khrushchev was thrown out, the Russians have indicated a greater interest in this area. You remember they have been stating publicly that they will come in full support of the North Vietnamese if they get into trouble with us. It is their duty to support.... Some of our experts think that is just a gesture. I am inclined to think that this relates to a different type of acceptance of the confrontation between Moscow and Peiping. It's obvious that Moscow and Peiping are competing for leadership of the communist international movement. It looked as if Khrushchev was ready to accept China's—influence on the North Vietnamese. This looks as if the Russians today are going to try to—to me it looks as if they're going to try to get back into some sort of a position in Southeast Asia. However, it may be that they are only taking this position in order to show the communist world they aren't fat cats, that they are vigorous and determined revolutionists. I think we'll have to wait and see what their attitude is as things go on. I can hardly believe that they would like to see China get substantial political gains whereas they are not able to do it. It looks to me with a keener competition existing between them—existing in Africa and even South America and

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other parts of the world—it is hard for me to believe that they would want to have China have great success in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, they can't take a position in support of us or they would be accused of being in partnership with the “evil forces of imperialism.”

SCHLESINGER: As I remember from things you told me in 1961, you had not only to argue with the Russians in Geneva but also with the Department of State.

HARRIMAN: Well, it's obvious when you are on the negotiating end that—I had a very

good team. I had Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan] and I had a young lawyer, John Czyzak [John J. Czyzak].

SCHLESINGER: I wish you would say something first about the size of the mission when you inherited it.

HARRIMAN: Well, when Secretary Rusk arrived in Geneva there were 126. That was somewhat larger because they had just been to a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meeting in Norway. But, I can't remember how many—I got it down. I remember that the Pentagon was originally represented by a very large group including an assistant secretary and a deputy assistant secretary. There were a number of fairly high-ranking officers. We finally got the Pentagon down to a colonel and a sergeant. Occasionally the colonel went home and he was replaced by a naval captain. But—I think that's a record. They were extremely helpful and extremely cooperative, but

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when we got the mission down to a small size, I found that I had much more time to think and much more time to do my own work. When you have a big mission the chairman has to spend all of his time attending staff meetings, which bore me to death and which don't produce anything, in order to keep everybody informed. And when nobody is sufficiently busy, they bother the chairman. If everybody's got more work to do than they comfortably can do, they keep themselves busy and leave the chairman alone. I might say I think my record was good. When I represented the United States at the ANZUS [Australia-New Zealand-United States] meeting in Wellington [New Zealand], I went there with no secretaries, one political officer, one lawyer, and one Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. That was our entire mission. We got secretaries from the Embassy—stenographic help, secretarial help from the Embassy—and from our missions in Australia. Of course, Admiral Felt [Harry Donald Felt] arrived with a complement of military, but I don't think any representative of the United States Government has ever gone to a meeting of that kind.... I'm utterly convinced that—I never did believe in Parkinson's Law [C. Northcote Parkinson. *Parkinson's Law*. Houghton-Mifflin. 1957] until I came back to work in this Administration—to find what had happened to the State Department. I am now utterly sold on Parkinson's Law and I am utterly sold that a man is—if he has too much

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of an organization under him he cannot do his own work. If you have a small staff, you keep in touch with all of them and, as I say, they are so busy doing their own work that they haven't time to bother you and you can do your work and think and have a chance to do it.

I had a rather amusing time in selecting a deputy.

START OF TAPE I

HARRIMAN: I discovered Bill Sullivan was one of the men sent out there, and I sent

word that I wanted to appoint him my deputy. I got back word—but nobody would accept him because of his rank. He was only a Class 3 officer. I said, “Well if it comes to the outside, the other missions will accept anybody that I say is my deputy. Nobody will know, nobody will care what his rank is.” So then they came back and said, “But the other members of your staff, Class 1 and 2, will not accept him.” So, I went over the list and sent home all the Class 1 and 2 officers who wouldn’t work under him. There were one or two that remained for awhile, but really this rank business makes no sense at all. Sullivan, I found, was the fastest accurate drafter, had a clear understanding of what we were doing, could resolve what our objectives were and act upon them; and he was an extremely good negotiator because much of our negotiations were done on a working level. You know, we had two levels—one on a

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working level and one of the head-of-mission level.

One interesting development took place while I was there. I think it was towards the end of '61. The President had asked me when I had been in Washington—I’ll have to look up the dates—whether I’d be willing to be Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, and I said that I would be very glad to do it. Before I left, the Secretary had mentioned this to me and he said, “What about taking the Far East?” I said, “Well, I’m working for the President. I’ll be glad to do whatever he asks me to do.” So, one evening—it was a very bad connection—the Secretary called me and said, “Will you take Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East? Will you accept it? The President wants to appoint you.” I couldn’t hear why he had changed from Europe, but in any event it seemed as if some decision had been made so I accepted it. I came home, I think, and it was early '62 that I was appointed. I found it an extremely interesting part of the world and, not only did I learn a lot but I think we pulled together a lot of the loose ends which had developed over the years. And Sullivan was an enormous help.

SCHLESINGER: At Geneva, I remember at one point getting a message from Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] who had gone through saying that you were being completely frustrated on the subject of dealing with the Chinese. Now, I remember speaking to

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the President—because you had State Department instructions saying you couldn’t talk to the Chinese—or something?

HARRIMAN: Oh yes, Chen Yi who was the Foreign Minister was in Geneva for some period of weeks, and I sent word and asked whether I could negotiate—have some talks with him. They came back and said no, unfortunately. I had intended to talk to the President about it because I thought it was a fantastic waste of an opportunity to have a talk with as high an official as he was. I later discovered that he was very much chagrined because he hadn’t been able to talk to me and left, and didn’t come back until just before the signing of the agreement in '62. At that time, I did have some talks

with him because I was then Assistant Secretary for the Far East. I took it upon myself to have talks. But this is the sort of thing that the State Department was very, very foolish about. I don't know what they thought. The trouble with it is, if you go through the discussions that have taken place in Warsaw, they write out a long scenario of exactly what our representative, in this case Ambassador Cabot [John M. Cabot], should say. They try to consider every conceivable thing the other fellow might say, and then he is told what he can say. During the war [World War II] I worked for President Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] and I had two- or three-line instructions, and wherever I went and whatever I did he assumed that I had some intelligence. He wouldn't have picked me

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unless he did. But it's a point of view which, I think, deserves a certain amount of reconsideration. You ought to pick an envoy the President has some confidence in and then hold him responsible. Obviously, the man has to know the general direction of the President's thinking. Obviously, the envoy cannot take commitments, but this idea that he shall not talk about this or he shall say this is a great weakness in attempting to get any flexibility out of the talks.

As far as the Chinese are concerned, I got nothing out of Chen Yi. He said, "Now we've made one step together, why not make some more?" I said, "What do you suggest?" He said, "What do you suggest?" I said, "Well, why not exchange scholars, exchange newspaper men, perhaps start a little trade; what about discussing matters of that kind?" And he said, "Oh no, you must get your troops out of Taiwan." Well, I explained that we didn't have many troops there. Then it finally came down to the statement: you've got to turn over Taiwan to us, and that is the first thing to talk about, and if that is done, we'll have no difficulties. Of course, I told him that we'll never do. We are committed to let the people of Taiwan decide what their own future should be, and that's what will happen. I said, "We have the power to stop you from taking it over forcibly and I don't recommend—I think you had better not try. But if you expect us to betray

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the people of Taiwan as the price of discussion with you, we'll never do it." That's where we ended. I am not suggesting that even if I'd had more authority that we could have gotten anywhere with it. I think Ken Galbraith was always a little bit overoptimistic as to what could be done. I don't know what conditions will ever develop which will make it possible for us to have sensible conversations with the Chinese. Chen Yi may have been operating under instructions. The Red Chinese may want to keep the United States as the whipping boy, to keep their people in line, the threat of the United States, to keep them in line to undergo all of the hardships there. But they are very rigid. And, so, the talks in Warsaw I don't think would have produced any more even if we had given our Ambassador greater flexibility.

But I just don't think it's a good system. I think that you ought to give the ambassador—I think it's very rarely that ever in history has anybody had as broad authority as I had in the different missions I was given. When I went to London in '41 the President

wrote me a letter of instructions which was only a short paragraph. He said I was to go to London, establish an office, be in touch with the Prime Minister [Winston Churchill] and other members of the British government and to recommend to him what we could do to be helpful to Great Britain and the British Commonwealth and Empire to keep them

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in the war. That was all I had. And from that we built an office in which we dealt with every phase of relationship with the British on the civilian side from the military planning, the munitions assignment, the war production, food, the shipping and so forth.

SCHLESINGER: Were Kennedy and Roosevelt at all alike in their administrative habits or had the system gotten so much more complicated by the time Kennedy came in? The State Department got bureaucratized—just different policies.

HARRIMAN: Well, I never worked in the State Department before. I've always worked outside. I've worked in the White House under Truman [Harry S. Truman]. I worked in the NRA [National Recovery Administration] on the civilian side. And I've been Secretary of Commerce and Marshall Plan Ambassador-At-Large under Truman. But I've never worked in the State Department, so I really can't answer that. I think that President Kennedy was the first President, that I know of, who was really his own Secretary of State.

SCHLESINGER: More so than Roosevelt?

HARRIMAN: More so than Roosevelt. Roosevelt selected the things that he wanted to handle himself and then he left to Sumner Welles the handling of many of the things to be done. He worked through Sumner Welles as Undersecretary and, of course, that made Mr. Hull [Cordell Hull] very unhappy. But, President Kennedy dealt with every aspect of foreign policy through Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and his assistants, in direct contact with the Secretary of State and the Assistant

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Secretaries of State. And he knew about everything that was going on. Obviously, the State Department made some decisions on their own. Obviously, Mac Bundy and his assistants spoke for the President. But on many occasions, on scores of times during the day he was consulted on telegrams, approved messages or at least approved the principles on which the messages or instructions would go out. Now his instructions were, of course, matters of basic policy. I'm not suggesting that he was the one that insisted on writing these long, detailed instructions. I don't know that he was ever consulted on whether that was to be the policy.

SCHLESINGER: It was sort of the practice. I think none of us ever questioned it. We just assumed that it always happened that way.

HARRIMAN: I'm not being critical about this but this is sort of a habit of mine that one gets into. I find that the Department—the desk officer thinks he can sit down and issue instructions to ambassadors. You know, he's got to issue them—whether he likes to do it or whether he thinks it's his job, I don't know. I've found that when I was in FE [Far East] when telegrams or instructions would come in I would always add—"for your guidance give consideration to the following"—or, "if in your judgment this is the way to handle it," etc. Always, every time, I rewrote almost every telegram, practically, of instructions. It's just

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fantastic for me to think that a desk officer who is usually a junior officer should be able to think better than an ambassador who is supposedly a high-ranking officer, a man that the President has particular confidence in. I think that President Kennedy was extremely successful in selecting his ambassadors both in and from outside the Foreign Service. And I think he had a larger percentage of officers that came from the Foreign Service than any other President. That may partly have been due to the fact that we had so many new jobs in Africa which made the percentage higher. But you know he got people like Bill Attwood [William Attwood] who did extremely well, Phil Kaiser [Philip M. Kaiser] in Africa, Jim Loeb [James I. Loeb], as well as selecting first-class Foreign Service officers for the jobs.

SCHLESINGER: In Geneva in '61 were you under fairly comprehensive and rigid instruction or did you have flexibility?

HARRIMAN: Well, I don't think anybody knew what this was all about. Obviously, we couldn't agree on any.... I never felt when I was in Geneva any undue restraint in the way of instructions in advance. I did have a good deal of trouble, which I think is quite natural, getting Washington to agree to certain provisions which were not written quite in the manner in which we liked. And it was rather hard to get that across. I'm used to negotiating. In business I used to negotiate

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agreements of lending money, and I always used to have trouble with the home office. That's a normal thing for a man on the ground who sees things somewhat differently than the home office. But it was interesting that in more than one case the President himself got into it, and he called me, himself...

SCHLESINGER: Oh, he did.

HARRIMAN: ...several times, and said, "Well now, we don't understand why you want this." I would explain why we were doing it and why I felt, and my advisers felt, that we were just as well protected this way as by the language that had been sent us as something to negotiate. And then he made the decisions,



then and there, on the telephone. The principal difference with the Department was over the acceptance of Souvanna Phouma and the manner in which the government should be organized—the personalities. There were some differences on a number of provisions which they would have liked to have and we would have liked to have had. But when you come to negotiate you've got to have a certain amount of give in order to get what you're after. And although some provisions, in looking back at it, we might have been firmer on, the main fact is that the communists, or at least the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, never intended to live up to the agreement. And so, it doesn't make a great deal of difference whether certain provisions of the contracts in relation to the operations of the International Control Commission [ICC], for example, had

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been written differently. If the Pathet Lao didn't want the ICC to come to the Plaine de Jarres, they wouldn't let them come no matter what the provisions were. There was some misunderstanding and some difference in interpretation of the language which has caused some differences and arguments. But I don't think that even if we had gotten the language we wanted, it would've been any different.

SCHLESINGER: Prince Souphanouvong—he's in the government, isn't he, or was?

HARRIMAN: Who?

SCHLESINGER: Prince Souphanouvong.

HARRIMAN: Prince Souphanouvong? Yes. You mean his brother, the half brother?

SCHLESINGER: The half brother.

HARRIMAN: Yes. Well he was in the government. He was supposedly the spokesman for the Pathet Lao. Originally he had been the spokesman for the Pathet Lao, but he had been more or less superseded. He was perhaps more of a Lao. He was a communist, all right, but perhaps more of a Lao than a communist; whereas, there were two or three men who were giving him orders, who were more communists than they were Laos. They were more under domination of the North Vietnamese. But he was a half brother and had a good deal of brains, but was a spokesman for the Pathet Lao.

SCHLESINGER: Do you have any impression as to whether the Russians were

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deliberately playing a double game, that is, on the one hand acceding to the agreements and on the other permitting the Pathet Lao to break the agreements, or were the Pathet Lao probably out of control?

HARRIMAN: Oh, I think that they were not in control. The problem as I look back at it, of the ceasefire, was over the activities of the Meo tribesmen. They took positions on the hills overlooking the airport. And the Pathet Lao just didn't feel that they could leave them there, so they chased them out. Their contention was—we made a terrible fight over this business and every day went by. I think it was an inexcusable act. But I think this was an act of the local people just saying that we can't sit there with these bayonets and mortars, and any day they wanted to lob some shells on the airfield they could do so. They wanted to clean them out which they did. I'm not trying to defend the Pathet Lao, but I don't think the Russians had much to do with that. Now on the Phnom Tha incident at the very end, it's very hard to tell who was responsible for that. The Pathet Lao wanted to teach General Phoumi a lesson. He sent reinforcements up there. They maintained he'd broken the ceasefire by moving his troops in certain directions. It's very hard in the best circumstances to hold a ceasefire, and they were pretty vigorous in taking advantage of any claims of a violation. When Phoumi violated the ceasefire in some small detail, they

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pounded back with a big attack. So I think they took advantage of it. I think, by and large, as the negotiations went, the communist side showed very little good faith. They were very suspicious of us, of course. And as I say, since after signing the agreement North Vietnam and Pathet Lao have never lived up to the agreement one single day. I can't imagine why the Russians took the commitment—this came out of the blue—this was voluntary on their part—why they took the commitment to see that the other side would live up to the agreement unless they had some intention of doing it. It's very difficult for me to see what they would gain by taking a commitment which made them responsible for an act of one of their communist allies. It would seem to be more sensible to sit back and let the fellow break the agreement and then pretend that they had nothing to do with it.

SCHLESINGER: It was after Phnom Tha that we sent troops into Thailand?

HARRIMAN: Yes. The Phnom Tha incident was so serious; it was really a major break in the ceasefire after a year. And it opened up the road down into Thailand from the north. Phnom Tha was right close to the Chinese. It made it possible for the Chinese to come down into Thailand by improving the roads to some extent. Then the President on a very quick decision decided after discussion with the Joint Chiefs and the Secretary of State to send our troops into Thailand. There were

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two combat teams and several squadrons of air force. The British came in with a unit of air force. The Australians did something—I've forgotten what it was. New Zealanders sent in a couple of transport planes. But the main force was the United States—we had about 5,000 ground troops, one team of Marines and one of Army, and I've forgotten the size of the air. It's easy enough to find it. And that, of course, jarred them loose. That was the kind of a

situation I would have liked to have seen us have before we started the negotiation. I hadn't thought of putting them in Thailand. I had thought of putting them in the...

SCHLESINGER: ...Mekong Valley.

HARRIMAN: ...Mekong Valley.

SCHLESINGER: How did you ever get that by the Joint Chiefs—the Thailand business?

HARRIMAN: Well, they supported—this was.... They were not anxious at all to get into Laos with the river at their back. You know, Laos is on the east bank of the river. And they didn't like that idea. But this was quite far back—the troops were quite far back. And that's what they were not at all keen to get involved in. It was a threat rather than a place where they could strike. But still, they could've moved in fast, if they wanted to, if there had been an attack on Vientiane. The air, of course, was a threat as well.

SCHLESINGER: I understand, I think from Roger Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.]

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that in general the Joint Chiefs were opposed to limited commitment.

HARRIMAN: Yes, they were very much opposed to limited commitment. They felt that a small commitment would gradually pull them into a very large one, that it was dangerous, and that there should be an agreement—before they took any step, there should be an agreement. I think when this first came up—I wasn't present, so I can't vouch for it—but when the question of putting troops in Laos came up—who was Chief of Naval Operations then?

SCHLESINGER: Burke [Arleigh A. Burke].

HARRIMAN: Was he Chairman of the Joint Chiefs?

SCHLESINGER: No, Lemnitzer was Chairman.

HARRIMAN: Lemnitzer was away, so anyway he served as the spokesman, and I think he said that if we go into Laos, before we go in we should have a commitment that if it escalates it will escalate into nuclear war...

SCHLESINGER: Yes.

HARRIMAN: ...with China. They never went quite that far again, but there was the general attitude of the Joint Chiefs, and I can understand why, that you

shouldn't take a small commitment without realizing that you might get into a position where you could be forced to go further and further until it was a major military activity, action, I should say. I'd felt that we could take a position just to show strength as we did

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in Thailand and, of course, we proved that we could go in with a show of strength and come out. I never thought that by putting in the kind of force I'd originally recommended necessarily committed us to a major defense there. After all, if it didn't work I thought we could withdraw and take up positions in Thailand or some other place and simply indicate well this showed that the Russians were not willing to accept the ceasefire or work out a neutral Laos and do whatever was necessary, but we weren't necessarily committed to a major action in Laos. Well, the Joint Chiefs, I think, naturally, didn't feel that way about it. They weren't in a position to make political decisions. Therefore, they wanted the President to understand that, if he took a step, it might mean a major escalation and before they got through in the planning we had an enormous part of the American ground forces committed in theory, at least, to an operation. I never thought the Chinese had the capability or wanted to come into Laos. That was a matter, there again, where a political fellow can deal in his judgment with enemy intentions whereas the military have to deal with enemy capabilities. So I never blamed them for it. But, that didn't change my point of view that certain things, as was proved in the putting of troops in Thailand, that you could take limited action, have a political effect and withdraw.

SCHLESINGER: At the end of April '61, Lemnitzer, in spite of the fact that

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the Chiefs in Washington were opposed to limited commitments in Laos when you and Lemnitzer were in...

HARRIMAN: Yes, the telegram is there. I don't know what he felt would be the commitment that would have to be taken, but when the Joint Chiefs presented something to the President, they naturally said, well we cannot recommend your doing this unless you're prepared to take these various steps. The most extreme was the one that you have heard of—Admiral Burke said you have to be prepared to commit yourself to nuclear war—use nuclear weapons—in China. Well, I suppose that if you do have troops or a limited number of troops and the hordes of Chinese come in, well, that is a proposition that you might have to face. But I know I was utterly convinced that the Chinese would have no intention of getting involved in a major way. They had never shown great interest in Laos, you know. The North Vietnamese were the ones who had shown the interest. And the interest the Chinese have taken is largely in the areas close to their borders. They have made a claim to some of Laos, you know. Souvanna Phouma when he was neutralist, opposing Vientiane, made a deal to let them build a road to—what was the name of the place?—in the north. They built that road and didn't go any further. It was always the

thought if they built that way, they would want to get on down. And it looked as if some of these things they were doing from the standpoint of a defensive

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position at this time—I don't mean to say they might not be prepared to use it as an offensive one at some future time—but I got the feeling the Chinese wanted to protect their borders rather than penetrate Laos at that time. Laos is not a very juicy...

SCHLESINGER: No.

HARRIMAN: ...plum. South Vietnam and, you know, when you get down to the lower Mekong Vally, that's where the....

SCHLESINGER: I can see occasional references to Chinese nationalist forces in Laos. Do you remember anything about that?

HARRIMAN: No. There never were any.

SCHLESINGER: Some people left over from...

HARRIMAN: Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. There were some of these—what do they call them? After '49 there were some of the Nationalist army that were forced out of China into Burma, the mountains of Burma. And Chiang Kai-Shek kept them supplied. They were roaming in the mountains from Burma to Thailand and Laos, and there was a small detachment of them that were up north of Vientiane, I think. But they never played a very important role. But they were a constant source of anxiety to the communist side. They were constantly talking about.... I think they were basically concerned that we might bring a whole bunch of Chinese.... But they've cause a lot of trouble in Burma, in Thailand, and in Vietnam. They were irregulars;

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they weren't National Chinese troops.

SCHLESINGER: They were living off the countryside?

HARRIMAN: They were living off the countryside. Supplied by air occasionally. [Interruption on tape] \*\*\* But these were soldiers that were forced out of China, loyal to the Nationalists. They lived off the land. I believe there are some of them still there. We insisted that a good many of them be repatriated to Taiwan, and I think it's very much to our interest to get them out of there because they are more of a

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\*\*\* Microphone muffled.

source of annoyance than they are of military value. They've gotten themselves involved in opium smuggling and in other ways that certain Chinese are very proficient in doing.

SCHLESINGER: Do you have any concluding reflections on the Laos experience?

HARRIMAN: Well, I think the wisdom of President Kennedy's decision to take the neutral route, to try and neutralize it, was the right one. And I think the previous Administration left Laos in the most appallingly dangerous position. I think we could've gotten into a major war there on ground which would have been most difficult for us to fight with very little to gain and we wouldn't be any better off than we are today—wouldn't be as well off today with a major military activity. Now I'm not suggesting that Laos is a settled situation but there is a de facto partition, where Souvanna Phouma has shown a lot of courage and determination. And it looks as if the Laos situation can play along as it is, pending

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developments in Vietnam. If South Vietnam goes, well, Laos will go. But I certainly hope that we stand firmly in South Vietnam and eventually some solution may develop. But we find ourselves in a much better position in supporting the main body of such public opinion as there is in Laos, the neutralist and the conservative group, whereas those who are opposing us now are the straight Communist Party. And I think it took a lot of wisdom and restraint on the part of the President to handle this—there were a lot of different recommendations, and he showed extraordinary decisiveness, taking quick decisions—taking positive decisions, I should say—after having full chance to review all of the facts and all the opinions that were expressed. If he hadn't done that, of course, Laos might be under Communist domination. So, that he kept away from either two extremes, and Laos is not unduly troublesome at the present time. But it may, well—I don't know how long it will last, of course.

SCHLESINGER: Did McConaughy [Walter P. McConaughy] as assistant secretary play any role in this?

HARRIMAN: I never was conscious, very conscious, of what he was doing because I think.... I was conscious of Alex Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] taking it up with the President or the Secretary of State. He was very much involved and knew the area well, and was working directly on these decisions that came to either authorize what I was recommending, went to a higher level. McConaughy was a very nice fellow, you know—

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very capable fellow. Jeff Parsons was part of the old regime. I really have no real knowledge as to what attitude he took. I do know in the earlier stages Foster Dulles did want to—his policy was to make this country into an American outpost. How he ever conceived of these sort of things... I just don't understand what went through Foster's mind, do you? Have you

got any conception? He was so.... It was all black and white—either they were for us or against us. These decisions about Laos, of course, were taken even after the 1954 agreement, you know. And even after they decided to pull out of North Vietnam, after they had made the compromise in Vietnam, they still wanted to use Laos. Now whether it was due to some optimistic personalities in the Pentagon or CIA, I just don't know. But the Ambassador—I know that Winthrop Brown strongly opposed these procedures and was for our accepting the Souvanna Phouma government.

SCHLESINGER: He seems like a very sensible man.

HARRIMAN: He was very sensible, yes. Have you talked to him?

SCHLESINGER: No, I have not talked to him.

HARRIMAN: Well, I don't know if this is any help about it, but this is because my admiration for President Kennedy was expanded the more I saw of him because of his ability to penetrate to the heart of every problem and to sift through conflicting advice and to some extent advice that wasn't sufficiently directed to the events of the day—the events that were before him and then when he made decisions he never seemed to regret

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them, and was ready to follow through. At the same time, if new situations developed, as was the case with putting the troops into Thailand, he was ready to quickly make a decision.

END OF TAPE II

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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