Robert W. Komer Oral History Interview – JFK#5, 12/22/1969
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Biographical Note
Komer was a senior staff member of the National Security Council from 1961 through 1965. In this interview Komer discusses working with McGeorge Bundy; the "inner circle" of the Bundy State Department; Komer's major contacts; the intelligence system; the power and responsibilities of the State Department; how Bundy screened what President John F. Kennedy [JFK] would see; relations with other key officials; Robert F. Kennedy and foreign policy issues; the Bundy State Department and White House staff; the "little State Department" in the White House; the bureaucratic role of the State Department; U.S. foreign policy in Asia; relations with key U.S. Ambassadors; handling Arab-Israeli issues; domestic pressures of American-Jewish community on JFK; Arabists in the Kennedy Administration; working with Myer Feldman on Israeli issues; the United States, Saudi Arabia, and oil; filling the power vacuum left by the British; dealing with Congress on foreign aid matters; counterinsurgency; and looking back at programs during the Kennedy Administration, among other issues.

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Robert W. Komer
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Fifth Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT W. KOMER

December 22, 1969
Santa Monica, California

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

THE BUNDY STATE DEPARTMENT AND HOW IT SERVED THE PRESIDENT

O'BRIEN: In the last interview you talked about what it was like to work with President Kennedy. What I'd like to start with today is how was it to work with McGeorge Bundy. What kind of a guy is he?

KOMER: Mac is the quickest man on the draw I have ever seen. In an article on Bundy and the Ford Foundation in Harper's or something like that--some friend of his was supposed to have remarked, "Bundy is one of the few people who can answer your question before you ask it." I thought when I read that, "How apt it is". Because I would go over (I'm normally a fairly quick man with the word, and I had organized what I wanted to say) and frequently I'd be halfway through proposing something to Bundy when he would give me the answer. I recall getting quite irked on occasion. At one point I said to him, "For Christ's sake, Mac. You don't even let me finish the proposition before you give me the answer." He said, "As long as I give you the answer you want, what do you care?" And it happened to be true. He generally ruled the way I hoped.

Bundy was tremendously quick, tremendously well-organized intellectually, which made him invaluable in the job which makes Sammy run faster than perhaps any other job in Washington. Second, Mac was superbly action-oriented, which I'm sure was one of the reasons why Kennedy saw as much in him as he did. I suspect Kennedy's reaction was very much like mine. To Mac the play's the thing; let's get on with it; don't come to me with propositions that don't have conclusions and action recommendations; it's nice to discuss China policy, but what can we do about it given the political constraints? By action-oriented I mean that Bundy had an unerring instinct for what needed to be done. A lot of people who were rather more fuzzy-minded about this (including a lot of the intellectuals) were much more put off by this than I.

I came from the intelligence business to the White House. It was my job to analyze and estimate, not to make policy. I became a policy advisor in a big hurry because I was a frustrated policymaker. But I recall that for the first six months in the White House I used to get from Bundy: "That's a fine exposition of a problem, but what do you want me to do about it? What are the options?" It taught me a lot. I found out later in Vietnam how important this was.

Kennedy was much more tolerant than Bundy, because Mac screened out 90 per cent of the things so the President didn't have to bother with them, giving the President a little more

time to concentrate on the other ten. Besides, JFK was more charitable than Mac. I just had dinner with Mac a few days ago, and he hasn't changed. But he's correct.

O'BRIEN: When did you first meet?

KOMER: I first met him when I went over to the White House. I had known Bill Bundy for years. We had shared offices in the National Estimates business at CIA. I had never met his younger brother. I ended up after the National War College as part of the Eisenhower NSC (National Security Council) apparatus. I was the deputy Planning Board member for Bob Amory. When Bob got irked after a while and decided not to go, I used to attend Planning Board meetings. So I spent three years as the NSC staff assistant and alternate Planning Board member for CIA; became heavily involved in the Eisenhower Administration's policy planning and policymaking through the NSC; suggested several major departures, most of which were shot down but which provided the basis for some of my proposals later accepted in the Kennedy period.

As soon as the New Frontier came in, articles immediately appeared saying they were abolishing the NSC structure; it had become a gigantic papermill. I happened to fully agree with that judgment, but they had broken my rice bowl. Since I was the NSC guy from CIA, I was going to have to get a new job in the Agency.

So as my valedictory I sat down and wrote a four page, double-spaced memo to Bundy and Rostow saying, "I have been three years in the NSC policy business, and in my view here are a dozen unfamiliar issues which the New Frontier is going to have to tackle because the last frontier didn't. These are not the great big issues that you fellows already know about, like arms control or re-examination of NATO strategy." They were like: Can we establish a workable relationship with Nasser? Hadn't we better do something about the West Irian crisis (which is cooking along slowly) by exercising preventive diplomacy? Cyprus is going to blow up at some point.

Two days later I got a call from McGeorge Bundy: "Interesting memo. Why don't you come over and talk to us about it?" I went to the White House, sat down in that big office (that I later occupied up in the old State building) with Bundy and Rostow. I had met Walt before, but never Mac Bundy. First question they asked me was, "You told us what's in your memo, so we needn't go over that. We're inclined to agree with you, and we're going to do something about them," which made me feel very good. Second, they said, "What do you think about the NSC structure? Is the NSC as big a papermill as we think it is?" I said, "Absolutely. I think you are very much on the right track. Having an NSC meeting over a single operative word in the 34th paragraph of a twenty-five page booklet on France is

no way to make policy." The next question was, "What would you do with the OCB?" I said, "Abolish it. That's an even worse papermill than the NSC."

Well, after twenty minutes of getting along famously, they said, "You're the kind of guy we'd like to have over here in the White House. The President's looking for fellows like you. How'd you like to come and work for Kennedy?" I said, "How soon do you want me?" They said, "How soon can you come?" "As fast as I can empty my desk." Well, I was the charter member of the Bundy State Department. I was the first guy hired by Bundy and Rostow in 1961. Carl Kaysen came after I did and then [Michael V.] Mike Forrestal and others, but I think I was the first new guy. They kept on [Bromley K.] Brom Smith and a few others but I was the first new recruit, and in a sense the last, because I was technically Mac's successor for an interregnum between Bundy and Rostow.

O'BRIEN: In your last interview you said there were never more than five or six, sometimes four, people who were really involved in the inner circle of this thing. Taking that in the Kennedy years, about '61 to '63, who would they be?

KOMER: It would vary with the issue. But the idea that all sorts of domestic staffers were involved in foreign policy is for the birds. If it was a major speech on a major issue, [Theodore C.] Sorensen would be involved. But the basic drive in almost

every case in the White House was Bundy, Kaysen....It didn't include me or Francis Bator or Forrestal unless we were concerned with the major policy issue. When Vietnam came along of course Mike Forrestal was involved, et cetera. On some occasions Arthur Schlesinger got heavily involved. Mac was sufficiently sure of himself that he was willing, indeed eager, to get all sorts of other people in the act or to entertain motions from wherever.

We even had our class radical, young Marcus Raskin. He was a destabilizing influence, but Mac kept Mark on because he said, "He's my hair shirt." And Mark is a very entertaining fellow; I like Marcus. But Mark's reactions were always so way out in terms of operability that it was interesting that Bundy, the high priest of feasibility, should have him around.

O'BRIEN: On this destabilization of the bureaucracy function that we've been talking about, almost all of these people in your group have a reputation of being very critical of bureaucracy and the way bureaucracy functions. Is it a matter of personality? Is it a matter of experience? Is it a matter of academicians coming into the government?

KOMER: Naturally, it is both personality and experience. Look at where we came from. I came from a bureaucracy, CIA, but an unusually flexible one in both the intelligence and managerial sense, partly because it was a secret bureaucracy. You know, in

the Agency we were allowed to think the unthinkable. But I was a bureaucrat, let's face it, and I also came out of the NSC, which was the most bureaucratized of all the national security machinery that had been set up, and by that token probably the least successful in the Eisenhower years. Mike Forrestal was a young international lawyer. Carl Kaysen was an economics professor from Harvard who had never held a government job before. Francis Bator similarly. They'd served in World War II, but they'd been back in academia ever since.

I would say the distinguishing characteristic was that the people who Mac tended to draw around him were doers, whether they came from academia or from the system. It was an interesting mix. He kept on a super-bureaucrat, Bromley Smith, and never let him do anything except paper shuffling, which Bromley did superlatively--and paper shuffling in the White House is a very important job. So I think it was more attitude and brains than background, because all of us coming from quite dissimilar backgrounds ended up doing the same thing and the guys that didn't do it very successfully fell by the wayside.

O'BRIEN: In terms of recruitment, do you think Bundy had this in mind in recruiting people? Did you realize at that point that one of your major functions would be to shake the bureaucracy, or was that something that was a by-product of what developed?

KOMER: Bundy and Rostow had it rather clearly in mind. They had it from the President that our job was to be movers and shakers.

This was what they told me. It was the stimulus to my taking the initiative to write them memos giving very direct answers to very big questions, whether right or wrong.

Yes, they did have in mind that we would have to develop some kind of ways to find out what was going on and stimulate response, but we were still in the period when the emphasis was on "stimulate response." In other words, the great Departments were supposed to do all of the responding . Our job was to get the State Department to move so that the Secretary of State would give the answer to the President rather than our giving it to him.

Every organization has its mythology. Our mythology was (I notice [Henry A.] Kissinger is putting out the same garbage; you have to put it out)--this is part of the mythology of the White House staff--that it only advises the President. It never intervenes in policy formulation; it only prepares and illuminates options. Well, it didn't work that way. A President goes where he gets the ideas and to the people who will perform. Bundy played a major role in the formulation and execution of foreign policy because Bundy performed. But the mythology was (they were, of course, cautious in telling this to me as their first recruit) that our job was to get the great departments to function.

They were also interested in getting at least a few guys who had been insiders. This, I found out later, was one of the

reasons why they turned to me. Bill Bundy told me that brother Mac had asked him to suggest a couple of bright middle-level doers inside the Eisenhower Administration whom he should pick up because they'd know where the bodies are buried and who plugs into whom. I gather it was a two-man list, and I was 50 per cent of it. Bill told me this later when I told him that I had gotten my job in the New Frontier by writing that famous memo. He said it wasn't only that. So I was hired partly as an inside man who knew how the machine had worked.

O'BRIEN: On this style of operation, you suggested that I read this [Keith C.] Clark and [Laurence J.] Legere book. They suggest that the failure of the OCB and the NSC was basically one of structure rather than personality. Do you agree?

KOMER: No, I flatly disagree with it, and I'm far more qualified on that period than whoever wrote that particular chapter. I think it was a failing not only of structure but of personalities. It was maybe fifty-fifty; both are very important. That's why I find that book rather simplistic because the guys who wrote it were junior staff officers who just didn't know what was really going on. I found, indeed, that my own views of what had really gone on were rather limited too.

O'BRIEN: Well, you had the Laotian crisis and a little later the Bay of Pigs and a little later the Berlin crisis--were there any difficulties that were created in advising the President as a result of the advisors not really having a structure in terms of the NSC?

KOMER: Not really. Here we get back to a basic point, which is that the real functioning of the national security advisory structure was the same under Eisenhower, Kennedy, [Lyndon B.] Johnson, and [Richard M.] Nixon. The labels have changed, the boxes have been renamed, there have been some minor changes, but essentially it's the same thing. Eisenhower overstructured it and insisted on an overformalistic decision process which resulted in a great amount of papermilling, waste effort, and lowest common denominator committee thinking. When Kennedy came along, he eliminated the names, the NSC did not meet as often, there was no Planning Board or Board Assistants, but, in fact, the ad hoc mechanisms added up to exactly the same thing, and Bundy's role was different only in degree rather than kind from the role of Bobby Cutler, just as Kissinger's role is different only in degree rather than kind from that of Bundy or Rostow. Now we've moved back to more formal structure and formal committees and subcommittees, but essentially they were the same. So I see a real continuity of actual as opposed to notional structure throughout that period. What changed was rather the relative emphasis that Presidents gave to where they got their advice from within the system and the relative power positions of many of the participants.

O'BRIEN: When you initially started, did you have a staff of your own people working with you--of course, you took over the Middle East . . .

The Modus Operandi

KOMER: Bundy was insistent on a small, lean operation. Bundy and Rostow only added on as they found a guy, not as they had a slot. They were rather determinedly anti-empire building. But we ended up somewhat bigger, I think, than Mac had originally envisioned. When I started out, I had no staff. I recruited one assistant, Hal Saunders, who is now my successor as the NSC staff Middle East guy. Hal had been a bright young assistant to Bob Amory, and I needed at least one research assistant to help me out. So I stole him from CIA just as I had been stolen from CIA. Throughout the period I had only this one Middle East assistant plus two secretaries. When I inherited Africa from [William H.] Bill Brubeck in addition to the Middle East, I then acquired another assistant, a really brilliant young Negro, Rick Haynes. So we had very little staff; I didn't believe in it. And there was sort of a challenge. I figured if Bundy could operate over there without much of a staff . . . . Mac only had Alice Boyce and Mildred and Bromley Smith--and they were just terrific. Bundy sort of intuitively was in favor of a lean operation. So I figured if Bundy could do it, I could. You run into a very important problem as staff grows--I don't know whether this is in Parkinson's law or not, but at a certain point you stop managing your job and start managing your staff. When I became the Special Assistant to Johnson for the Other War, I cut off at a staff of six guys. I felt beyond that I'd be spending more time making sure they did their work than doing what I needed to do.

O'BRIEN: Well, now let's take the Komer "infrastructure" in government and start developing it. You have contacts, of course, in CIA, but over the Kennedy and early Johnson years, who became your major contacts, the major people you dealt with throughout the bureaucracy?

KOMER: I started out with the great advantage of knowing an awful lot of the working level types. Besides CIA, I knew a lot of the people in State, Defense, AEC [Atomic Energy Commission], etc., because I was part of the NSC interface where we dealt with all these agencies. I'd also been at the War College and met all sorts of guys. Over time I developed very close relationships with my oppposite numbers in State, AID, and CIA and the Pentagon who worked on Middle East affairs. John Leacacos in his book Fires in the In-Basket points out that we in the Middle East had the most closely knit relationship of any of the major areas, except perhaps disarmament.

Phil Talbot, the Assistant Secretary; [William S.] Bill Gaud, then the AID Assistant Director for Near East, South Asia; and [Townsend J.] Tim Hoopes, Peter Solbert, who were in ISA [International Security Affairs] and I worked very closely together. While I was quite an innovator in terms of substantive policy, I thought that the way to operate was as a joint operation. We were lucky in this for two reasons: One, I think, it was an unusually competent group; but second, we were dealing with a secondary problem area.

Phil Talbot was one of Dean Rusk's few initial personal appointments. Rusk had great confidence in Talbot, who is infinitely better than Ken Galbraith's nasty comments in his book would suggest. Rusk delegated Middle East policymaking to Talbot except on major issues. So if Phil and I were together on something he knew he could probably sell Rusk; I knew I could probably sell Bundy and Kennedy--unless we were suggesting something really wild. Similarly Bill Gaud was really in charge of Middle East, South Asia over in AID. So, in essence, we were in an unusual sideshow area where the second level or third level guys were really running the show as long as their bosses had confidence in them.

This helped in our good relationship. I knew that if Phil Talbot and I agreed on something, the chances of Dean Rusk reversing it were not too great, so it was worthwhile dealing with Phil instead of trying to go over his head, because I also knew if Phil Talbot disagreed with me, JFK was more likely to get a negative from Rusk than a positive. Sometimes we had to disagree, but at least they were open disagreements openly arrived at.

O'BRIEN: You had a number of people in the State Department in Near East Affairs that are regional specialists that at this point are going out, becoming ambassadors. How does this group compare with other areas in the State Department?

KOMER: I would characterize the Middle East group in the State Department as being highly competent, though rather narrow, one of the elite groups in State, like the old group of China hands so decimated by [Joseph R.] McCarthy. By and large I was quite impressed with the Foreign Service professionals of the middle and senior ranks whom I dealt with throughout the late fifties and sixties.

O'BRIEN: Some examples here. Can you remember them?

KOMER: All right. [Harrison M.] Harry Symmes was the State board assistant who joined me in trying to push through the "new look at our policy toward Nasser" exercise in 1959.

Rodger Davies, the Deputy Assistant Secretary and before that the Arab-Israeli area chief for so long--outstandingly able fellow. [William J.] Bill Handley and, before him, [James P.] Jim Grant, both of whom assisted Talbot on South Asian affairs in particular, both outstanding fellows. Jim Grant came over from AID; Bill Handley, incidentally, came up from USIA [United States Information Agency]. Interesting that in the Rusk State Department there was a little more looseness than there is today. These guys were quasi-FSO's [Foreign Service Officers] like, I guess, I myself could be categorized.

Less qualified were the military bureaucracy. They just are not terribly good in political-military matters, and we did not have good military people in ISA or abroad, top notch. The civilian leadership at ISA was excellent. Of course, they gradually assumed the policy reins.

Using Intelligence

O'BRIEN: Well, hanging this on a hook for a while and coming back to it a little while later, we'll get into the Middle East. But persuing the White House operations, you were mentioning that you were a person who was in the process of providing intelligence but not really putting out policy . . .

KOMER: Evaluating but not operating on the basis of it, yes.

O'BRIEN: Right. Okay, now you have a rather large structure for the purposes of intelligence gathering as well as evaluation, and these things are focusing in, through the estimate reports, into the White House. As you look at that, now in '61 through '63, is it good intelligence? What are your criticisms of the system?

KOMER: By and large, yes, good intelligence. The tendency in the intelligence business is to look at the failures and ignore the non-failures. If by and large we were well informed in the Middle East, this was regarded as SOP [standard operating procedure]. If a coup occurred in Syria or something like that and we didn't know, then a Star Chamber proceeding ensued. So intelligence never gets credit for keeping people well informed or advised but always gets the blame if something goes kerflooie, and you have to look back and find the reason.

The substantive intelligence product that we got was pretty good, and I say this as a man who is more inclined to be an intelligence critic than advocate. It was not terribly perceptive. And here I make a distinction that has been made by others as well: The Kennedy people used factual--let's call it hard

intelligence; they gobbled it up, including the President personally. I doubt that there has been a President in US history who gobbled up as much raw take as John F. Kennedy (or as McGeorge Bundy, although Rostow and Kissinger do exactly the same thing). They read reams of cables. Incidentally, I was raised in the same school; I too read reams of cables.

But we thought we knew as much about the conclusions to be drawn and the consequences to be analyzed as the estimators, and we were right, by and large. The consumers of intelligence in this case were a very bright big league crew. They didn't need the estimates. Much more important was the hard take, of course, the classic example being the Cuba missile crisis: There are the pictures, et cetera, et cetera. Therefore, unless you had requested a special national intelligence estimate to get the official formal committee consensus view on whether the Chinese were likely to invade Laos before the end of 1962, the NIE's [national intelligence estimates] did not have much impact. Estimative intelligence had, I think, had greater impact in the Truman and Eisenhower years.

By the way, the Kennedy thing continued under Johnson--the attitude--because by and large you had the same national security players.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the areas you were involved in--and you can take this by nations, if you wish, or specific instances--what are some of the more outstanding examples of good intelligence about

predicting what's going to happen, or at least letting you know what's happening, and perhaps some of the worst examples?

KOMER: Bear in mind that I covered nineteen Middle East countries and then acquired thirty-six African countries and kept an interest going in Indonesia and several other countries that weren't in my parish, so it's sort of hard to generalize. I will say by and large the intelligence community did a much better job of warning us of impending crises than the policy community did in doing something about it.

A very good case in point is Cyprus. Another good case that recently reached its climax is Libya. Another good case--the intelligence people were excellent on the relative military capabilities of the Arabs and Israelis and on finding out what they were up to.

Our intelligence on what the Pakistani were up to is in my view a major area of failure, perhaps because the intelligence people had a vested interest in the base at Peshawar. But on India-Pakistan they were probably less good in the substantive intelligence and analysis field than in most. We were quite weak on Pakistan, on the regime's intentions and capabilities et cetera.

Mind you, I had been a professional analyst since 1947, so it was pretty hard for the people who had replaced me at CIA to tell me much because I'd been reading the same stuff ten years longer than they had. So I didn't worry much about NIEs. Frequently I found that I disagreed with the estimative thrust of

the NIEs, partly because of the inevitable intelligence tendency to view with alarm. I remember myself writing an NIE on South Africa in 1954 that predicted the only question was whether South Africa would blow up in three years or five years. Well, here it is fifteen years, and the damn white regime seems stronger than ever.

O'BRIEN: In the input here in intelligence (of course, it's coming from various agencies: NSA [National Security Agency], DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency], and CIA) is there any agency that in the sense in providing you--of course, some are involved with raw intelligence, others involved with evaluation--are there any serious weaknesses as you look at it from the White House?

KOMER: Well, there's just no question that the CIA output on almost any subject was the best, because they are a truly professional intelligence organization. Now and then INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research] had an unusual expert. On subversion in the Middle East, Herbert Liebesny, for example; or they had one guy on Libya who would just spend an awful lot of time on it, [Robert D.] Bob Baum. They have a man on North Vietnam who is awfully good. But the best institutional intelligence almost invariably came from CIA; the worst intelligence qualitatively from the military, except for the hard stuff which is a matter of collection and technical analysis--the more technical it is the better, by and large.

O'BRIEN: Any examples of bureaucratic in-fighting here between these agencies?

KOMER: Once again, Dennis, the Middle East was a sideshow. We didn't have big arguments, let's say about missile gaps or Soviet intentions or about what's going on in Southeast Asia. We worked rather closely with the intelligence people. I can't recall big arguments like that.

Sometimes some people favored one kind of a policy and others favored another kind of a policy. But that is different. When you come, for example, to the Congo, where our policy was executed partly through clandestine means as Laos today, then it is not the intelligence people intervening in policy: It is the intelligence people being used as executors of policy (just as you use the Army, Navy, or Air Force). Then they are perfectly entitled to state their operational and policy views, and they're not trying to muscle in. They are operating agencies rather than intelligence agencies in those cases. So those kinds of differences are quite legitimate. They should not be regarded as, you know, intelligence getting in over its head, et cetera.

More on Mario Operandi

O'BRIEN: Now, in your style of operation, in going into the bureaucracy for either intelligence or ideas, I wonder if you could explain how that proceeded?

KOMER: I had a simple instinctive rule which was generally to go to the lowest level at which I knew or suspected the best answer would be available and then to go on up from there. Since I knew such a wide circle of people, since Kennedy and Bundy had already conditioned them to listening to the White House guys, and

since later relationships of confidence developed, if I wanted to check out some thoughts on Pakistan I would first call the Pak desk officer or some Pak expert in Defense or CIA. Then once I had gotten myself better educated, I would go to the next guy up the line, probably the country director, and work it out with him. I wanted to sort of sense their reactions as it went up the line because this is the way the decision process would go in any of those agencies, so I duplicated the decision process.

Then by the time I called Phil Talbot and said, "Phil, shouldn't we do such and such or so and so about Pakistan. There's a cable in from the ambassador, and he's wallowing around, and don't you think we ought to try this," I already had a pretty good idea of what his people thought. I knew that one of the things Phil was going to do was turn around and ask his experts, so what's the use of my trying something out on him without having sort of checked it out first.

Sometimes it was much better not to play the game that way. In the Pentagon one normally did not because the farther down you went the less knowledgeable or innovative the guys were. So the way to do business with the Pentagon is to start as high as possible. I would call [John T.] McNaughton or Tim Hoopes or Peter Solbert, and start with the policy level below McNamara and ask them to beat up their guys. If I called one of their rear admirals I would only get the school solution--unless I happened to know him personally. By and large, approaching the

problem institutionally in the Pentagon, you went to the top civilians and down from there.

O'BRIEN: How did the State Department respond? A guy like Talbot, did he ever become upset that you, rather than going through him, were going in to his people?

KOMER: Phil was very decent about that. I advert to the fact that we had an unusual group of, let us call them, gifted amateurs. I was an amateur; Phil was an amateur; Bill Gaud was an amateur; there was a real professional in CIA, but he happened to have been a longstanding personal friend; and the key guys in ISA were amateurs. So they were a much less bureaucratic crew. Moreover, they all happened to be outstandingly good guys. I also made the point that the Middle East was being a sideshow with sort of decentralized decision-making. This meant that Talbot didn't have to be so bureaucratic because he could sort of speak for Rusk, McNaughton could sort of speak for McNamara, Gaud could sort of speak for Fowler Hamilton or Dave Bell.

O'BRIEN: Now in terms of actually routing things, was there ever a time that the Secretary's office wanted them to go through, someone like Lucius Battle or, later, [Benjamin H.] Ben Read?

KOMER: Yes, yes.

O'BRIEN: Much conflict?

KOMER: Not much, partly because Luke and Ben--and Bill Brubeck when in that job--were friends, and they knew how it was done. They were

Administration people, too, let's remember. They, too, were amateurs. They knew a lot of this leakage was going on. They knew that if they tried formally to control it, they were going to have a head-on with Bundy and Kennedy. You had to allow a certain amount of behind the scenes contact.

After JFK's assassination the State Department did capture more power because Lyndon Johnson's style was different and his desire to depend on State was different. He was less knowledgeable in foreign policy and I think quite rightly said, "I want to depend more on the Department structure." But by that time everybody had been working so much in this informal pattern that it continued. Below the top level, the names and numbers of the players were sort of the same, and they could no more clamp down on my private lines than the man in the moon.

Remember I was dealing at the second level, sometimes the third. Between Bundy and George Ball, where there was a natural competition (particularly over European policy), there were a lot more sparks flying. Of course there were many times when we got into trouble.

The sort of unofficial deal which I had with all these agencies was that we'd exchange ideas informally. I frequently would send over draft memos to the President to Talbot to look at privately, or maybe even someone down the line. I might not send them over a final draft, but I worked very closely with them. The tacit understanding was that we would communicate as much as we wanted

informally, but that when it got to the official sign-offs, they should go through channels.

Frequently time just did not permit this however. Delays, other priorities, et cetera would lead Talbot to say, "I've got a letter here to King Faisal that is piled up in the Secretary's in box. The Secretary is off at some conference. Ball doesn't know anything about this problem. It's got to get over so the President can sign it." And I would say, "Phil, send it over informally. I'll get it typed up on the green; I will do the White House staff work. I'll send it in and tell the President that Rusk is going to send this over officially in a couple of days, but Talbot says the chances of his disapproving are only one in twenty so, Mr. President, why don't you sign and send it." We did that even more often with cables than with letters. But we kept our skirts clean.

Bundy too played it very much on the up and up with State. He had to, because even though Kennedy was 400 percent in his corner, even though Johnson respected him very much, they had to observe the proprieties. If Dean Rusk and George Ball wanted to really start bitching about the White House staff, they could have made any President pull in his horns.

O'BRIEN: That's my next question. Did he?

KOMER: My view--and I may see from a very limited room with a view--is that the relationships between Rusk and Bundy were much closer than the adversary proceeding that the press portrayed. I think

Rusk was grateful, in a way, that he had as articulate an advocate as Bundy. Mr. Rusk is a remarkably balanced guy in many ways. I think his view of Bundy was sort of like mine: Jesus, what a phenomenon. And I think after awhile they worked very closely together.

I know Bundy was constantly on the phone with all those guys. Mac would say, "The President's just called me on the horn, asked me such and such. I think I ought to tell him so and so, Dean. Does that make sense to you?" The President called Bundy because he knew he'd get that kind of quick staff work, whereas, if he called Rusk the State bureaucracy would take much longer to respond. This wasn't Rusk's fault. As I was saying this morning, bureaucracy is bureaucracy, and if we didn't have it, we'd have to invent it.

Most of the trouble I ran into was when I one-upped the Departments by moving too fast. I did not do this as a matter of choice, but only on those few cases where I just thought we had to respond quickly. So on a couple of occasions I did send things in to the President that I shouldn't have or didn't send things in that I should have.

The implicit power of veto in the hands of the White House staff is very interesting. They screen the mail, and if the President has confidence in you, a lot of things you just don't send to him. Ambassadors may think that every message that they slug for the President (there are a few who were bold enough to

do it besides Galbraith) gets to the President just as it is. Well, the hell it does. Not with a tough-minded guy like Bundy (who may, by the way, be protecting the ambassador). If Kennedy read something stupid--and even a David Bruce occasionally sent him something stupid--Kennedy would blow a fuse and Dave Bruce would have a black mark that he didn't really deserve because he got mad and popped off about something. Bundy was actually doing a favor to some bird by keeping such a cable out.

The guy we protected the most was Chester Bowles. Chet couldn't resist writing these eleven page cables to the President. Neither Kennedy nor Johnson could stand that sort of thing. I used to hold off about 60 percent of Chet's mail in order to protect Chet. The ideas were pretty good, but I knew damn well they weren't saleable, and Chet going in there would just get another Johnsonian blast. Or I would write a little one page note saying, "Mr. President, Chet Bowles has written you another eleven page blast saying we ought to give more food to India. I want you to know he's done it, and I don't see any reason why you should read it." If he wanted to read it, he'd write on there, "Give it to me."

The organizing of the White House paperwork was another brilliant Bundy innovation. Bundy must have learned this from [Dean G.] Acheson, who learned it from George Marshall--the one page memo or less with little boxes to check saying, "Yes; no; maybe," or "I want option A, option B, option C," in other words,

completed staff work which permitted a President to read and digest very quickly and then, to indicate his decision. In many, many cases this greatly facilitated the President's job. He didn't have to sit down and write a memo or call Bundy up and waste thirty minutes on the phone (much less with Komer and his sideshow). Instead he'd just check a box saying yes or no.

Once again, Bundy used to reject lots of papers from State, Defense, or other bureaucracies or from his own staff. He used to complain they were just stating problems and not giving answers, not giving options. They were sending things in without cluing the President on what he ought to do about them. We staffers learned this lesson quickly. This is one reason why our pieces of paper were usually the action pieces that got acted on.

State would send over a policy paper on Yemen for example. It would come in beautifully typed with a summary, six pages of discussion, and some conclusions and recommendations that were about a page long, full of qualifiers plus background annexes to boot. This was because this was an official document, the official view of the Department of State as rendered to the President. It was going into the files where the historians would see it. So they covered everything and covered all their flanks as well. There was a constant fight to cut them down; the Secretary and Ben Read and Luke used to try to cut them down. But I don't think they realized that the bureaucracy was producing for history, for the official record.

Ours were staff designed to produce action. To go on-- I'd have gotten from Phil Talbot an advance draft of this twenty-three page paper on Yemen. I'd call Phil and ask "Where's the final paper?" "Still up in the Secretary's office." Well, I'd be likely to say, "Phil, I'm going to alert the President that it's coming." Then I would write a little memo saying: "Mr. President, we're still waiting for some twenty-three page thing that's in the Secretary's or the Under Secretary's in-box. What it says is essentially that we ought to recognize Yemen within two weeks. Here are the reasons. I recommend you approve; if you don't want to approve, I suggest you answer that you think they're on the right track but want to have a little more time; therefore to let you know again four weeks from now. Check box yes or no or et cetera." I would send that in. Kennedy or Johnson would operate on that document and we would never send the twenty-three page paper up to him. When it came over we would make a little notation on it "President approved on such a date." Unfortunately, sometimes the date was before the date of the document.

Such informal channels of communication between staff and President, between staff and Cabinet, and staff and bureaucracy were very important. I think that these informal channels reached a peak of closeness and effectiveness under Kennedy and continued with only somewhat diminished impact under Johnson.

O'BRIEN: During that time--looking at some of the McNamara memos, the McNamara memos come through like, sometimes, action-oriented memos. Did the State Department ever get wise to this during the Kennedy Administration?

KOMER: Yes. There were occasions on which memos from State looked unusually action-oriented. In some cases I wrote them myself and sent them over to Phil and suggested this was the kind of answer the President wanted. This is annoying to bureaucrats, but several times we did it that way by collusion.

If you want to find the real prideful man in Washington, it was not Dean Rusk; it was Robert McNamara, as I found out when I started dealing directly with him. He is a superlative manager. He'll take decisions, and he'll decide the right way if you put up the right issue, but he damn well doesn't want you monkeying around in his cabbage patch. You put up his decisions to him and don't go telling the President what he ought to be doing. Tell him, and if he agrees with you, he'll tell the President.

Bundy and McNamara took each other's measure very early in the game, and I suspect their close association came from mutual respect, that here were two very quick men who thought the play's the thing. But I was always surprised that there wasn't more edginess there. It spoke well for both men.

O'BRIEN: How was McNamara for people monkeying around in his house as far as you were doing with State? I mean going down the line and . . .

KOMER: Happy as long as it was down the line, happy as long as the result of that process was that McNaughton signed off or bucked the issue up to McNamara before I took it to the President. If it was a military aid matter and I short-circuited McNamara--I now and then short-circuited State by collusion with Defense, because sometimes on certain issues the State guys just weren't with it. But no short-circuiting McNamara. A couple of times I forgot this in my Vietnam job and went to the President with things that Bob thought were his business. Let me tell you, he told me so in spades. Yet, I think he was one of my greatest supporters, who recommended me for all these Vietnam jobs--without ever bothering to tell me, incidentally. But he has read me the riot act more than anybody else in Washington, with the exception of McGeorge Bundy.

O'BRIEN: In the White House when you put the Situation Room in, does this help the operation at all as a kind of mechanical aid?

KOMER: Yes, helped a good deal. One of the little things done by the Bundy staff for the President was to insist for the first time that the White House be an initial addressee on everything. For the first time, no matter how sensitive the cable coming into the State Department, it came automatically to the White House. It might be slugged "For the President Only," which meant that often only he and Bundy would read it; it might be slugged "No Dis" [no distribution]; you know, they had all sorts of fancy classifications; but everything came. We insisted on that, except for

private letters (you could never devise a system which would have insured that State would send over all the private letters its ambassadors wrote). But it would insure that on any hot issue where you have to file by cable and where you couldn't use the scrambler phone because that was not secure enough, the White House was knowledgeable. This was a real breakthrough. It was hard to one-up a White House staff that was knowledgeable.

O'BRIEN: This was a tremendous job of screening, though, wasn't it?

KOMER: But relatively easy. Bundy was a tremendous speed reader; Rostow was; I was; Bator; Kaysen. My technique was to have one of my secretaries screen the take for me in three piles. We wanted to get everything, so there was a tremendous pile of stuff coming over. One pile we knew automatically we didn't want. (You can spot the administrative traffic.) A second pile was put aside for further screening. The third, and by all odds the smallest pile was stuff that I ought to read. Then if I thought it was important enough and likely to have been missed by Bundy's own readers, I'd send it over to him.

Kennedy loved to read a lot of the raw take; we sent a fantastic amount of stuff up to Kennedy. Mac personally did the screening job with some help from the staff, If a cable came in from Ken Galbraith saying that war is about to start between India and China, I knew it was going to get picked up over in the sit [situation] room and sent to the President. But if a thoughtful cable came in from our ambassador in

Pakistan psychoanalyzing Ayub, I knew that the screeners normally would not show that to Bundy. But it was the sort of thing Jack Kennedy might want to read, which meant Bundy would want to read it, so I would send off a little copy to them. And if there was something that should be done about it, I would add on a little covering note. The art form was to make the covering note as small as possible while still making the case. Mac used these little three by fives; so I tried to use three by fives. The art was to get it down small--one of the tricks of the trade.

Relations with other key officials

O'BRIEN: What is General [Chester V., Jr.] Clifton's role in this whole operation?

KOMER: Marginal. Ted was the intelligence briefer in the sense of a JCS [Joint Chifs of Staff] briefer. Ted brought in the cables and the morning intelligence report and read them to the President. Since the President could read twice as fast as he could, I'm sure that the President said, "Give them to me." I am unaware of a major issue where Clifton played a substantive role in the foreign policy field. If he had gotten out of line, Bundy, I'm sure, would have bashed him. Ted's a good man, by the way; I don't want to denigrate his role. But he was not a substantive member of the foreign policy team to my knowledge. In my field he never had anything to do with anything.

O'BRIEN: How about Maxwell Taylor when he comes aboard?

KOMER: A horse of quite another color. An advisor who did not see the President on a regular basis--did not want to, was consulted on

big problems, which he thought about and then generally wrote the President a very thoughtful memo and subsequently maybe came over and talked about it if the President wanted him to--same role with Johnson, by the way.

To return to the NSC, the Kennedy meetings of Cabinet-level officers and advisors were essentially the same as the old NSC, except that under Eisenhower a particular group always came, whereas Kennedy preferred to tailor the group. He had someone as head of the NSRB [National Security Resources Board] whom he didn't want coming to meetings on these very sensitive issues. So they started not calling them NSC meetings because if they did, two or three people would come along whom Kennedy didn't want there. For example, the Secretary of the Treasury under Eisenhower always talked too much, and you could predict what he was going to say: if it costs money, don't do it. [C. Douglas] Dillon was not invited to a lot of these meetings, even though he was a very influential man. So Kennedy got together basically the same group but didn't call them NSC meetings.

O'BRIEN: How did the President react to the Joint Chiefs in this regard?

KOMER: That's another reason. At some of these meetings he didn't want the Chairman of the Chiefs. How do you mean, how did they react? They played the same role. It has become an art form; always allow the uniformed military to say their piece. And with a Secretary like McNamara you can depend on it that McNamara has done his best to make sure that what the Chiefs say is consonant with what McNamara things the President will buy.

O'BRIEN: How about Rusk's role in some of these meetings now? He took a rather passive role in the actual meetings, didn't he?

KOMER: The relationship of an activist President with a Secretary of State or a passivist President with a Secretary of State is a fascinating one. Eisenhower encouraged John Foster Dulles to take the reins on foreign policy. In good military form, he delegated that power to Dulles but took it back whenever there was an issue on which he wanted to personally play the key role, one good case being the Suez crisis of 1956. So with Eisenhower, who believed in delegating authority, John Foster Dulles played a major role and others, like [George M.] Humphrey of Treasury, played a major role because they were strong, dominant men.

If Kennedy had put in a really strong man as Secretary of State, there would have been fur flying. I don't think John F. K. and Robert McNamara would have gotten along if he'd made McNamara Secretary of State because I think McNamara would have disagreed with him vigorously. Now, McNamara was 200 percent loyal. McNamara would do what the President told him, but there would be real clashes over issues between a McNamara and a Kennedy. As a matter of fact, on many defense issues Kennedy didn't buy McNamara's views. But Dean Rusk saw an activist President, saw gradually that this activist President was a pretty damn good man, and so he fell into the role that is natural for a Secretary of State with a President who is determined to run his own foreign policy. And I've always admired Mr. Rusk for that. He didn't hesitate to say no when he disagreed, let me assure you.

O'BRIEN: On McNamara, did you ever get any indication---and this is, of course, towards the end of the Kennedy Administration--that McNamara was being considered as a possible replacement for Rusk as Secretary of State?

KOMER: Never. But Arthur Schlesinger says he was, if I recall correctly. Now another thing, remember this, because it happened to me several times and it's happened to others far more times, Presidents are very adroit at floating trial bolloons for trying out their subordinates, or at needling them. Lyndon Johnson, of course, a superlative practitioner. Or, more likely, a Bill Moyers would sense what the President wanted, and a Moyers would lay it on. Or it's a guy who wants a job trying to lay it on. Or it's a President who is thinking about it but hasn't made up his mind floating it and seeing how it flies.

I've always thought Arthur overstated the firmness of many of the things that Kennedy told him. Arthur has an excellent memory, and I was much more atuned to Arthur than most of the members of the Bundy State Department. But frequently Arthur, in his books or in subsequent conversations, et cetera, says, "Kennedy said to me . . . ." It's quite possible Kennedy did say to him, "What would you think of McNamara as Secretary of State," because Arthur is a great sounding board, especially with the intellectual community, but that didn't necessarily mean that it was a serious idea. Kennedy sort of was thinking out loud.

Johnson didn't do that much thinking out loud. With Johnson, he probably had a motive. It was much more than floating a trial balloon or just thinking out loud. And more power to him. This is the way you do business.

Kennedy was great in asking people for advice if he thought well of them. Many times I've been in his office standing around waiting for my turn to speak (you know, he sort of encouraged an open door policy) and he'd ask those present about some problem that O'Donnell or Sorensen or Schlesinger had brought in. Occasionally, because I was the junior man present, he would ask me first. This was very uncomfortable. I was one of those who believed in sticking to his last, and if I didn't know something about a problem I said so. So I would say frequently, "Mr. President, I don't know my rear end from third base on that problem." But I can't recollect any in which I believed at the time or believe now I had anything significant to say except to add to one side or another.

Bundy also encouraged interchange. Bundy was a great believer in self-starting; he didn't operate by consensus. He did have a meeting every morning of the staff. I finally convinced him to cut it down to three times a week because we were mostly wasting our time listening to others speak and we, by this time, were working very well in harness so there wasn't any need for a meeting every day. But Bundy managed himself much better than Henry Kissinger is able to. Bundy is the more disciplined

manager than poor Henry, who I gather misses half his meetings, while Bundy could always organize his day no matter what was going on so that he could have his morning session, et cetera. And in those sessions we discussed all sorts of things: domestic policy, foreign policy, et cetera. So one generally knew a certain amount of what was going on on other issues. This was not the case with very sensitive ones--like Cuba II.

O'BRIEN: How about some of the other people involved here; Ralph Dungan, for example?

KOMER: Everyone deferred to Ralph on Latin American matters, which I thought he handled rather well. Ralph was a fairly regular attendee at the Bundy meetings. Ralph worked very closely with Mac, partly because Ralph was a smart fellow and knew Mac had something useful to say and knew where things were in the power structure. Ralph knew Rusk and McNamara would listen to Bundy, so Ralph would do the same thing that I, in a less important role, did, which is if you get Bundy signed on and get Bundy to carry the ball for you, things will just move a lot more smoothly. There was a good relationship there, and he was, in effect, the Latin American colleague of Bundy. If something he was doing impinged on larger foreign policy considerations, Mac really zoomed in on him. Mac did carry a lot of weight on Latin America, but the main laboring oar was Dungan's. This is just my impression from watching the process.

O'BRIEN: On a guy like Rostow, on a guy like Bundy, and their style of operation, can you give us a kind of comparison and perhaps a contrast of these two?

KOMER: Mac was always much briefer and pointed, much better organized. Walt loved to talk. Walt went in for a more discursive style of discussing. Mac budgeted his time much better. They're not the same kind of guys. They got along perfectly well.

It was not in my view Bundy's saying, "I can't work with Rostow" that led Kennedy to send him over to State; it was perhaps that the President found Walt rather discursive. But more than that, I believe that he really wanted to jack up policy planning, that this was regarded as State's business, and that if he didn't give Rusk a good policy planner it just wouldn't get done. So this was part of the Kennedy invasion of the State Department. After all, there were two strings to Kennedy's bow: first to more and more.in practice use the Bundy State Department to do what the State Department couldn't; but second, to constantly try to improve State. Who else moved over at the same time? [Frederick G.] Fred Dutton . . .

O'BRIEN: Dutton, to congressional relations.

KOMER: Yes. It was part of "build up State Department."

O'BRIEN: We've talked about a number of people here on the White House staff. Let's go into a few more that are on the periphery here, and then I'd like to just come back and search out some conflicts, if it's there. He had a number of other people that in a peripheral

way touch on foreign policy, guys like Richard Goodwin, for example. What are your contacts with Goodwin?

KOMER: Dick and I got along well. So far as I could tell, his contribution was almost all in phrasemaking, speechifying, except on certain aspects of Latin American policy that I'm just not familiar with.

O'BRIEN: A person you did have conflict with, I'm sure, is Myer Feldman.

KOMER: Plenty. Mike's natural role in defending the special interest groups who were constantly complaining about tariffs, quotas, and other things, invariably impinged on foreign policy. The textile industry's complaints about foreign competition went to Feldman, up the domestic chain to Kennedy. Kennedy would check them out with Bundy and get the State view too. Frequently there were adversary proceedings, with Kennedy loving it and sitting in the middle. Pit the foreign policy guys against the domestic policy guys.

Bundy, I have reason to believe, always played it square with Mike in clueing him when he was going to send up a recommendation from State. I have the impression Mike, who was a cagey guy, sometimes did not tell Bundy, but that never did Mike any good because Kennedy always sent it down to Bundy.

The reason why I know about this is because the same thing happened on the Arab-Israeli thing. Every President has a minorities adviser who represents the domestic constituencies. Mike Feldman was it. And Mike was constantly filled full--by the US

Jewish community incidentally, not by the Israeli government. And Mike would, more often than not, try to sneak around end and get this word in to Kennedy and get a decision on something that was wanted without the foreign policy view being ground in. Bundy and Kennedy had either a tacit or explicit understanding that that would not be tolerated because they always came back down through Bundy, and I was always given my day in court. On more than one occasion Kennedy would get Mike and myself together and say, "Okay. Now, let's hear what the Jew thinks, and now let's hear what the Arab thinks," which used to annoy the hell out of me, that I was regarded as pleading a special case. But Mike and I really had at it.

I never once had a feeling that Kennedy yielded to the special pleading beyond what I regarded as sensible. And I learned a lot about the importance of the special plea. So I have no complaints about the existence of that other channel. And it's interesting that currently many writers and historians are saying that the Kennedy period in our Arab affairs was much more evenhanded than the period before or after. This is an area in which I spent plenty of time, And I have no cause to complain. I think, for that matter, the Israelis have no cause to complain, nor do the Arabs.

O'BRIEN: How about [Jerome B.] Wiesner?

KOMER: Jerry was great. My business, my side, the Middle East and Africa, really didn't swim into Jerry's camp very much. I was an old

arms controller. I had served on the [Charles A.] Coolidge Committee which was to come up with a new disarmament policy in the final days of the Eisenhower Administration. I was the CIA disarmament adviser because we put it in Amory's office. It was just one of my extra jobs. Occasionally I would get involved in the arms debate with Jerry and Spurgeon Keeney and Mac and Carl Kaysen.

O'BRIEN: You had a memo with some thoughts about the reasons why--this is in 1961--the Russians resumed nuclear testing.

KOMER: Probably was asked what my thoughts were. This was one of the good things. Bundy encouraged a certain amount of that. I, for example, ask the promoter's profit of having first raised the West Irian issue and arguing that we should find a way to get the Dutch to give that island to Sukarno lest we end up in a dirty little war out there in which we were cast in the role of defending the hated colonialist. I was the one who started that; I got it up to speed. Mike Forrestal took it over. But, since I had gotten it started, when I thought things need to be given a shove or when I had an idea to contribute I'd go see Mike or Bundy or occasionally try to write something to the President and check it out with Mike. My role in arms control was sort of the same: a reasonably enlightened kibitzer.

O'BRIEN: Do you ever remember Ted Sorensen getting tied up in any particular problems that you were dealing with?

KOMER: Almost never, unless it was a public statement or a speech which was to be Presidential. He was involved, of course, in the Cuban missile crisis. When it came to great policy statements, Ted was involved. Very seldom was Ted at Cabinet or other top level meetings, if it was a Bundy account. That's a very good way of telling whether he was really involved. I don't think the President was sort of privately consulting him on the side. Sorensen's role in foreign policy, to my knowledge, was limited, except in national emergencies.

O'BRIEN: How about the so-called Irish Mafia--O'Donnell, [Lawrence F.] O'Brien, these people? Did they ever come into it at all?

KOMER: Not at all except--and this is very important--when we consulted them about an important congressional problem. It was almost invariably us badgering them, because we would make proposals to Kennedy, let's say, on foreign aid, and he'd say, "Try them out on O'Brien and Henry Wilson and Mike Manatos and see. I don't think we can get sixty votes on that." So we'd go up and badger them.

They were always very decent, but usually it was us trying to get the congressional angle from them or them getting a big blast on the Hill from [Thomas J.] Tom Dodd on the Congo and calling me up and saying, "Dodd says he's going to write the President or give a speech, et cetera. What do we do?" I would have to field that and go back, usually through them, if I could. On a few occasions I had to trot up to the Hill myself when they made me.

But except on the mechanics, the O'Brien-Manatos-Wilson combo almost invariably took our substantive advice. They might reject it because they said it was non-doable, but we didn't have big arguments, except, on things like size of the foreign aid bill. They'd say, "[Michael J.] Mansfield said the most he was going to be able to get was three billion, and so don't you guys worry about designing a five billion one."

O'BRIEN: Well, now, how about Robert Kennedy?

KOMER: Bobby was consulted extensively on major foreign policy issues--if it was really big, unquestionably. He was the President's closest confidant, just no doubt about it.

O'BRIEN: How about something like Komer's war?

KOMER: He may not even have known that it was called Komer's War. No involvement, except possibly in the CI [counterinsurgency] group he may have heard about it occasionally. But Bobby, of whom I also happen to be a great admirer, did raise with the President or with Bundy a number of things that came to his attention, so I did get involved with Bobby occasionally.

For example, a couple of real feudal barons from Iran, the Kashgai brothers, began giving Justice [William O.] Douglas (who is very naive) a lot of bull about how they were great liberals and the Shah of Iran was a big reactionary. Bill Douglas took this to his friend Bobby Kennedy. Bobby raised it with the President, who said, "Mac, have someone go over and find out what the score is and clue Bobby on this. Or if he's right, let's do something about it."

So I was sent over to talk with the Attorney General, and I laid it on the line. He said, "Well, you obviously know a lot more about this than I do, but I still think there is something in this Douglas thing. Will you go talk to him?" So I went and had breakfast with Justice Douglas. He was much less flexible than Bobby had been.

Later on, I might add, I got a note from Bob with a little thing down at the bottom saying, "You know, you were right about Iran and I was wrong." He was very good that way.

Now, Bob was very interested in counterinsurgency, and so I participated in sessions with him where I always thought he was quite good. He was the real spark plug of the thing. But Bob didn't get much involved in the Middle East sideshow. Berlin, Vietnam, Cuban missiles--yes.

O'BRIEN: How about something like policy towards Nasser and Sukarno?

KOMER: Interestingly enough, I don't think Bob got too involved except insofar as he was in on meetings. If it were a big meeting and took up several subjects and he sat through it till my subject came up, I could generally depend on him to vote with the angels. Remember, I was not a great cold warrior. Komer's War in Yemen is a little case study in how we kept out of a war. West Irian was how we defused a war. How to do business with Nasser was an attempt to defuse the Middle East dragon. So most of my exercises were low posture exercises.

O'BRIEN: We've talked a lot about the way the Bundy operation performed and some of the things that it did, but we really haven't talked much about the President in this. Is the President aware of the role that this organization is taking and the way that it is shaking up the bureaucracy? Does he ever become concerned lest this organization is undermining morale in the State Department or in the Defense Department?

KOMER: Occasionally, yes. I do not think this organization undermines morale, by and large, within the State Department. Let's just take the area I know best, the Middle East and Africa. Those guys were pathetically grateful--this went right on down to the desk officers--that they had their man at the White House. I was regarded as much as their man at the White House as Kennedy and Johnson's man at screwing them.

O'BRIEN: You've become a broker by now, haven't you; in a sense?

KOMER: Yes, a middle man, a link. Presidents have to decide how much noise level they're willing to sustain in order to get things done. In the last analysis, Kennedy encouraged a high noise level, was willing to live with it. If the bureaucracy didn't like it, let them lump it. That might be a way of purging the bureaucracy. LBJ was more ostensibly attuned to the bureaucracy. Johnson said more and appeared to do more about returning power to State and other Cabinet offices, but in fact I would say that Johnson's staff exercised just about as much power as Kennedy's did.

O'BRIEN: Obviously, this operation is not all happy. Are there any major conflicts in terms of ideology or personality that develop either within the Bundy staff or between the Bundy staff and other people in the White House?

KOMER: Well, the biggest, of course, and one that I'm not too clear on, was over the multilateral force, which was largely a State Department and, I believe, [Paul H.] Nitze operation. As I recall it, Kaysen and then Bator as well as Bundy, were anti-multilateral force because they thought it just wouldn't wash, was not a practical proposal, and was getting in the way of various other things. So there was a substantive issue on which there was a lot of fur flying.

My field was, again, relatively small potatoes--maybe my using the personal pronoun so much is a measure of the lesser importance of the area. I was a bigger wheel on the Middle East because nobody else was playing around with it.

I was always much stronger for reworking the balance between India and Pakistan than my colleagues. I think they all agreed in principle that we had put too much emphasis on Pakistan at the expense of India and that a rebalancing was desirable. The trouble with State and Defense was that they always wanted to try and do it in a way which would cost nothing. I didn't think there was a way to help India more and bring Pakistan to heel more without breaking some eggs somewhere. They wanted to find the riskless policy. Well, there isn't any. When you really

worry too much about risks, you end up with a non-policy or with more of the same.

But there were lots of natural antipathies. There was an obvious coolness between George Ball and Bundy on occasion, which I think revolved around George's being a very dynamic and active fellow too--who naturally as being the number two in State--was resentful of the role of the little State Department in the White House.

George was always a formidable character to me, too. Fortunately, he didn't spend much time on the Middle East. But on the occasion when he did, the Cyprus crisis of 1963-64, when he had been called the Cyprus desk officer, he took the Cyprus crisis right away from NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs] in State. He just didn't want me or Bundy mucking around in it at all. And Bundy (I think--with the wisdom of hindsight--very wisely) decided, "This is George's problem. Let's not fuss around."

Intellectually and in policy terms, Ball's views of what to do and mine were very close together. I saw myself as Ball's natural ally in the White House. George saw me as an unnecessary ally and didn't want to listen very much. So there was the coolness toward a junior trying to get in. His own people were much more angry at him that I was because he cut them out of the pattern, too, and in some respects unfairly so.

But by and large, not great frictions. The locus of power, particularly on political-military policy, flowed not only from State to the White House operation but also from State to McNamara in part. The DOD team under McNamara (Nitze, Bill Bundy before he came to State, John McNaughten, etc.) were generally more open-minded and aggressive than the State people. So they too had an initiating and policymaking role, with State once again case in the role of saying, "Well, let's not go so fast."

More Yets on Modus Operandi

O'BRIEN: Then you would agree with what has almost become a part of the mythology of the Kennedy Administration--that the sluggishness of State does contribute to the development of the little State Department in the White House, and also with the assumption of powers that Defense has.

KOMER: Correct. Where I differ from others is in recognizing that State is almost by definition going to be a conservator. You were saying earlier State has the day-to-day responsibilities. State is cast in a bureaucratic role that almost always makes it the agency which says, "Hey, let's not go so fast." There's greater continuity of policymaking in State than there is in Defense or, certainly, in the White House.

We were more innovative because we changed every four to eight years. State didn't change that way. We were a political staff, even though we were most largely professionals. I was in a political job, though I had as much professional background as any FSO or regular officer. But my role was political. And what

happened on 20 January 1969? All the Rostowites were moved out and a new crew came in, largely bureaucrats but political appointments. So naturally the little State Department is going to be more innovative, more imaginative. It gets changed around a lot. It's not allowed to develop such great institutional roots.

Moreover, each new Administration has to say it's going to do things differently. Nixon has to say, "My foreign policy's going to be new and different, and I'm going to reorganize the NSC, and the AID agency, and the Pentagon." You may not remember, but the Kennedyites said all the same things, though not all that many changes were put into effect.

O'BRIEN: Well, we've identified, and of course a lot of the writings on the period have identified some of the major problems that the little State Department participated in. Are there any problems of some importance that it does not participate in or takes a minimal kind of role in?

KOMER: If a problem was delegated consciously someplace else to a guy who did not want our help, we stayed out of it. I just gave you one, Cyprus. My role on Cyprus was mostly sort of second-guessing and explaining to the President what George Ball was up to, mostly a reporting role because George did not really want help. I was very frustrated on this, complained to Bundy that George didn't know what a good friend he had, and Mac said, "Stay out of this one. The President is looking to George Ball not Bob Komer. You're just going to have a head-on with George Ball,

and the President's going to rule in his favor because he's already told him it's his baby." I felt badly about it, but George did as well as could be done under the circumstances, with a couple of minor modifications. I think if George had been listening actively to me, he might have done a number of things he wanted to do but was dissuaded from doing by State.

By the way, remember that the final returns aren't in yet on Cyprus. We have not been doing terribly well in the post-'64 period, though [Cyrus R.] Cy Vance did a brilliant job patching up the second big crisis in '67. Cyprus could blow up again. If it blows up again, I will not give George Ball such high marks, nor will he give himself such high marks, because he and I (Dean Acheson was of the same persuation) were all thinking of a more actively interventionist option and were held back.

O'BRIEN: Well, we've talked about a number of things here.. . . Pardon me. Go ahead.

KOMER: So that's one case, you know, when we just didn't. There was very little that I wasn't involved in in the Middle East or Africa that had a major policy implication because Kennedy and then Johnson were quite activist Presidents; much more involved in detail because Kennedy wanted to be in the period '64 to '63; much more involved in detail in '64 to '66, not because Johnson wanted me to be but because by that time I had become an established member of the community. By and large LBJ did not take the same activist interest in the day to day. He would not have bothered with Yemen

(Bundy didn't either, for that matter). But by that time I was well established as the White House Middle Easterner and African.

Now, another very important link which may not have been fully developed was that the Bundy staff worked very closely with the Budget Bureau. We found Budget a great mine of information, especially when organizational or management issues came up; we realized what many people don't realize--and why they don't has long been a mystery of life to me--that money dictates policy and that there was not much point in our coming up with a brave new policy toward Latin America, Nasser, or anybody else if the requisite appropriations or adjustments could not be made because of Budget opposition. On the contrary, frequently Budget knew ways to get money that we didn't, so we worked extremely closely with Budget. They were adjunct members of the Bundy State Department.

[Henry S.] Harry Rowen, for example, now president out here, used to sit in on the Bundy and Rostow staff meetings. Occasionally the director would come over. We had staff guys in. I worked very closely with the Budget Bureau International Division on foreign aid matters because, after all, I had in my area some of the biggest military and economic aid clients. I found the Budget guys very good, and they were happy that we touched base with them, and we that they touched base with us. It was a very successful collaboration.

O'BRIEN: Are there any questions that you feel should be asked or haven't been answered as you sort of reflect back over this period of time?

KOMER: We have already discussed the institutional role, the bureaucratic role. I am convinced that if a "Bundy State Department" didn't exist it would have had to be invented, that it did fill a very serious gap.

I'd like to add another one of Komer's rules of bureaucracy, which is that bureaucracies are notoriously unprone to self-criticism. It's unusual to find a big organization (whether it's a private firm, an outfit like RAND, or the Defense Department or the Army or you name it) being very slashing and direct in its self-criticism. That's too much to expect. Bureaucracies are defensive animals. Therefore, you almost have to look on the outside for critical analyses of the functioning of a bureaucracy. If you want to know how the Air Force really functions or ought to function, ask RAND; if you want to know how the State Department really ought to function, ask Brookings; or if you want to know how the Defense Intelligence Agency [DIA] ought to function, ask CIA; if you want a good critique of CIA, ask DIA. Stir up the animals. Thus a White House staff of bright, able guys whose loyalties are to the President, not to their institutions--performs an indispensible role in the constructive criticism process.

Next Komer rule: Bureaucracies are very slow to innovate and change. They tend to be conservators; they tend to follow

established repertoires and to be very slow to adjust to changes in the situation. And the bigger the bureaucracy, usually (all these rules are just generalizations subject to qualification), the harder to change. The bigger the elephant, the harder it is for him to move; it takes more power.

For this reason, if you want innovation and change, look outside the bureaucracy. It's too much to expect from State all the brave, new ideas about foreign policy. Some will come but by and large, your innovative, imaginative rethinking has to come outside the bureaucracy. You've got to have the bureaucracy to do the day to day important business of government, et cetera. There are notes to be delivered, dispatches to be written, analyses to be made, and you have to have a bureaucracy to do that.

I'd say the same thing about the military. The most innovative defense planning did not come from the JCS. It came from the bright civilians, among other places from a bunch of guys from RAND, who became some of McNamara's whiz kids. In general I think they made a fabulous contribution. Plenty of mistakes, but didn't we all make plenty of those.

O'BRIEN: Is there a Komer rule on the intensity of conflict?

KOMER: There is a Komer rule that creative tension is the way to bring out truth and arrive at successive approximations of what is sensible policy. You've heard me on various parts of it. Set up an adversary proceeding. Set Defense against State and then the White House will get both sides of the story and put the President in the glorious position of being able to arbitrate.

And it illuminates the issues. Defense explains why State is wrong. CIA comes in from the flank and explains why both of them are wrong. AID comes in and says for its particular parochial reasons that Defense programs are no good. Out of this, each bureaucracy doing its thing if you structure it and encourage it, you will get closer to what really needs to be done and can be done; whereas, if you do what they did in the Eisenhower NSC, which is to emphasize consensus and concurrence, you'll get the lowest common denominator of committee policy. That was what was really wrong with the overformalization of the policy in the later Eisenhower years, especially after John Foster Dulles left. You got consensus policy. The bureaucrats scratched each others backs, and you got sort of immobilism; whereas, in the Kennedy years we were deliberately trying to stimulate argument.

O'BRIEN: The thought just happened to come to me: Is the fact that you do have the, you know, the inertia and the conflicts and all during the Kennedy period the fact that many of you got out and opened up these lines of communication down into the bureaucracy? Now, many times you were testing things. Were there many times that things were, in a sense, jumped from the normal bureaucratic tracks directly to you?

KOMER: Yes. Normally bureaucrats won't do that. There are exceptions. But if you develop a relationship where the bureaucrats know that you are eager for new ideas, where they know that if they tell you

informally you might come back and collude with them at influencing their bosses, they will passively support you. They will pass on on their own initiative a copy of their own memo to their boss.

Talbot's people would sometimes pass to me the memo they were writing to Talbot and I would read it before Phil would, because he had more to read than I did. And then I would be able to come in from the flank and say, "You know, there's a new idea," or, "I was talking to your guy, Bill Jones, and Bill mentioned. . . ." I concealed the fact that what Bill Jones did was to send me a bootleg copy. Now there is some of that.

But then maybe hierarchical discipline is essential. If I were Assistant Secretary and some of my people did with me the way they did to Phil Talbot, not that it's illegal or illegitimate, I would have been very unhappy. Phil was much more open minded and tolerant and permissive than I was, because he saw it was ending up beneficially. I'm a much more activist guy. I would expect to be quicker off the dime than Phil is; I think he would agree to that. That's one reason why we were a good team. I was always saying "Hey, let's do this, let's do that." He was saying, "Now, wait a second." You need those guys, and the two of us were a good team. He was right as often as I was that I was getting a little one-sided. But it was less that the bureaucracy all of a sudden opens up and everybody becomes an innovator than that you create a tolerant and permissive atmosphere and the bureaucracy passively collaborates more.

Now, who are the innovators in the Nixon Administration? The two that immediately come to mind are once again on the White House staff, [Daniel P.] Moynihan and Kissinger, two strong, activist , very imaginative types.

Comments on Policy: Vietnam, Korea, ROK-Japanese Settlement

O'BRIEN: You made the comment that JFK was perhaps the first American President that really understood nationalism and revolution and the first American President that got on very well with Sukarno and Nasser. I would identify you in your views on this as one of the people who felt that Nasser and Sukarno were the wave of the future, was the wording, I think, as it came out of the late Eisenhower Administration. Now, there are other cases in which the Administration does not really identify with the nationalist leaders in nations--I'm thinking of Latin America and Asia as an example, as well as perhaps Africa. Why is that? Is it a matter that people like yourself push this idea in some cases, and in other cases the intelligence and the push is not there?

KOMER: Partly. Partly because there was someone aggressive arguing for a policy point of view which was congenial to the President. Partly because some of the African things were sideshows compared to Nasser and Sukarno. They're pretty big potatoes in anything but the main tent. I daresay the same about Latin America. But name me a case where we didn't do business with the nationalists, and I'll try and see if I can remember some reasons why.

O'BRIEN: Well, I'm thinking of perhaps Vietnam as a case in which. . . .Of course, there is this argument that runs back. . . .

KOMER: Of course, [Ngo Dinh] Diem was the nationalist alternative to the French, and compared to Bao Dai or that other fellow who was interim president in there at some point or any of the others, Diem turned out to be by far the best bet. And the productiveness of Diem's early years, '55-'59 if I recall correctly, suggests that we did bet on the optimum horse. I feel that our failures with Diem were more failures to really push him in the direction we wanted much more vigorously. I alluded to that much earlier. Here I speak only with the wisdom of hindsight because I was not involved in what we did with Diem. I remember great frustration on the part of Bundy, Forrestal, and Kaysen in various meetings when they were reporting on the problem.

Here I feel the failure was more one of execution than understanding, that we failed to make the bureaucracies (in this case, State, Defense, CIA) police in turn their field bureaucracies in Vietnam to do the things that the policy called for. It wasn't until 1963 that we finally told Diem that we were withholding aid unless he shaped up. Cabot Lodge regards this as one of his great successes and described to me how he got the word and went in and Diem raised hell with him. Cabot said, "I'm sorry, I can't turn the spigot back on." And then Diem caved just when we were about to cave. Well, who waited until 1963 to do something like that--or was it late '62?

It's all too easy to say with the wisdom of hindsight that the sins of our earlier Vietnam policy were more in flawed execution than in weakness of concept. And Diem was the nationalist alternative.

Now, the farther you got into a war the less able you were to construct a radical nationalist alternative. Vietnam is such a chaotic situation. It has never been really a nation. Here we're trying to create a viable nation, a national entity in the middle of a war. You can't say that Diem even compared as a national hero to Nasser or Sukarno or Gandhi or Nehru; that role had already been preempted by Ho Chi Minh. There was no super-charismatic candidate in the South. If there was one, show me; give me even one who anybody said was more charismatic than Diem. We had hopes for "Big Minh" [Duong Van Minh], found out he was a fool, an incompetent. He had a little charisma.

O'BRIEN: Was there every any thinking of pulling back?

KOMER: The other side of this coin is disengagement from dictators. We were very good in pulling back from Syngman Rheeism in Korea. Korea is an example of where we did use a lot of pressure on the post-Rhee government because we had finally gotten fed up with Rhee. The parallels between our Korean and Vietnamese policy are very interesting. And we really put the blocks to the ROK [Republic of Korea]. There again we ended up with a quasi-dictator, Pok Chung Hee, but we were much more tough-minded with him, and it worked. I think he's now probably grateful for it too.

Another one of the little exercises I plugged for hard was the ROK-Japanese settlement. I presented it to Bundy and he said, "Try it out on the President," and the President said, "I think you're right. Let's go." I constituted myself sort of the hair

shirt of the US government on the ROK-Jap settlement. My investment in it was maybe two dozen memos to the President, proposed messages, or needles to State once every six months.

It was again primarily somebody else's project (Forrestal's and later [Chester L.] Chet Cooper's) but I was the guy who having raised it in the first place, kept an eye on it and kept giving needles. I got Kennedy to talk to Winthrop Brown about it before Win went out to Korea.

The State Department's line was: "If we begin pressing Tokyo and Seoul, we'll get in the middle." They'll both blame us. My answer to the President: "They're both going to blame us anyway; that's the fate of a superpower. Second, what do we care if we get the blame as long as the Japanese pay the bill?" My whole idea was that since we were in the middle anyway, we had to press, really push, prod, cajole, persuade the two governments into settling this because otherwise we're going to have to continue paying the full bill. This issue was already ten years in negotiation. All I did was to stimulate a certain amount of Presidential drive which forces the bureaucracies on all sides to work harder and finally come to grips with the thing. The ROK-Jap settlement is worth a billion dollars over a decade in support to South Korea. In effect, we shifted the economic aid burden for development of South Korea to Japan while we continued to carry the military security burden.

O'BRIEN: What was [Edwin O.] Reischauer's response on this? Do you recall?

KOMER: "Good in principle, but don't try to tell me how to do business with the Japanese. They've got to be handled very delicately. Things can be done only in a Japanese way." But Ed was with it; so were our guys in Seoul. The natural tendency of Embassy Tokyo was to focus on the way the ROKs were holding things up. Seoul turned around and focused on the way Tokyo was holding things up. Our role was to tell both of them to get on their horses.

I think we got the settlement maybe two or three years earlier than we otherwise would have simply because John F. Kennedy got behind it and pushed, and JFK pushed because there was some guy who presented things he could do that he was happy to do, and then kept following up and keeping him clued on what else was needed. It was the application of elbow grease to problem solving. And the great thing about JFK was he wanted it.

Here's a President who's going to have to see the new ambassador to South Korea before he leaves. Komer sends in something for him to talk to the guy about, then the President talks to Brown about getting a ROK-Jap settlement. And Win thinks, "Kennedy knows about this problem. What did the President talk to me about? This problem. I'd better do something about it." It made Kennedy happy; it impressed Win Brown; and when he came back and reported to the State Department that the President of the United States was concerned about this, that was a little more powerful than Bob Komer calling up Bill Bundy and saying, "Bill, the President is concerned about this." That's the way you play the game.

Then the President has to receive credentials from the new South Korean Ambassador. What does he say to him? "Mr. Ambassador, I like South Korea. We're strong allies. We'll come to your support," et cetera? No. The President wants to say something that will impress the ambassador, otherwise why should he waste his time just receiving a letter of credence, which, by the way, they don't read anymore. So I go in and say, "Mr. President, whack this guy. He's obviously going to send a long dispatch back to Seoul on his first meeting with you (and maybe his last, because Presidents normally don't see these ambassadors very much except to just shake their hand)." "If you don't tell him something to say, he's liable to invent it, which ambassadors have a habit of doing." So the President says to the new South Korean Ambassador, "We can't afford to carry you guys forever. It's about time we get the Japs to pay their share. And since the Japs creamed you, you're entitled to get a billion dollars." That goes right back on the wires, et cetera. This little way he kept things going.

O'BRIEN: Well, this is the way, then, that President Kennedy was briefed on all these state visitors that came in. Did you have a standard kind of procedure, a one page briefing memo?

KOMER: We used all sorts of little tricks. The drill is the State Department prepares a huge briefing book with dozens of tabs. It includes the texts of proposed toasts, the proposed communique, proposed arrival and departure speeches, and then biographies of

all important people who are coming along. We would write him a two or three page memo: "These are the gut issues, boss. This is what we hope you'll say. If you want more detail, read State's briefing book which we have carefully delivered to you." We plastered our three page memo on top of their hundred page book. You know damn well the President's going to read your three page memo and not the hundred page book. And if you're a careful man, you summarize and include everything that's really important from that great big book (which isn't much because, after all, these official visits, though called three day visits, are really three hour visits). By the time the President's finished hearing the tale of woe from the distinguished visitor, who usually wants something, the amount of time to transact business is rather limited.

Ergo, we said, "Look, there are only two or three things that we can possibly get out of this visit. Here they are." You can say that on a page. State meanwhile is protecting its flank against the off chance that this guy may bring up some land case or treaty problem that was last discussed in 1939. If something like that comes up, thank God the book is there, but it comes up one out of a thousand times. And it may well be that a smart President wants to say, "I've never heard of it," instead of being briefed.

Relations with key Ambassadors (U.S.)

O'BRIEN: Leaving South Asia out of it but just talking in terms of the Middle East, there are a number of ambassadors that were professional career people as well as some political appointees. I'd like to briefly go over a few of those with you and some of your contacts with them. How about Badeau, starting with Badeau?

KOMER: I thought John was a remarkably perceptive and rather effective academic; all things considered, a big plus appointment. Incidentally, Badeau was very reluctant to accept the more friendly toward Nasser policy until December 1961 when he came home and Talbot and I both argued with him. He agreed finally that we ought to take a flier on it. Before that he had said, "This may be the right thing, but I'd rather wait till I'm more firmly established on the ground before I tell you whether I think it's sound or not." Then once John got committed to the policy, he worked hard and effectively at carrying it out.

O'BRIEN: How about a guy like Parker Hart?

KOMER: Pete is, in my view, the highest type of Foreign Service professional. He was in a one man country, with Faisal down in Saudi Arabia. I think he did a brilliant job of hand holding with Faisal and keeping Faisal on the straight and narrow. Pete's role in influencing Faisal in the Yemen war was magnificent.

Now, Pete is not the most imaginative guy in the world; he was not a great policy innovator. I would say that in five months in Turkey I sized up the Turkish problem rather more effectively than he had in four years there, not that I necessarily did more about it, though I tried. But Pete--a first class professional, essentially an Arabist. But I also thought Pete's handling of Middle East affairs during that final year or several months or so when he was a lame duck was very good. I'm a strong Pete Hart man.

O'BRIEN: How about his communications? Did he ever go directly to you?

KOMER: No, Pete was very responsible on that, a true blue FSO. Very few of the professionals went around end. Plenty of the amateurs did, which is unsurprising.

O'BRIEN: How about [Walworth] Barbour?

KOMER: Outstanding, a four star ambassador with whom I worked very closely. You just happen to be mentioning guys that I was closer to than most. Wally was the fellow who was supposed to tell the bad news to the Israeli government while the good news got told them through their White House connections. Wally, a thotoughgoing professional, turned out in a very balanced way to be the defender of the Israeli point of view (which was, after all, his job), never pulled punches, respected more by the Israelis than any other American ambassador. Wally would occasionally write things to me and I to Wally because so much of that problem was a White House problem and he was not betraying his trust. No one tried to run foreign policy with us in the White House at the expense of the State Department except for a couple of amateurs.

O'BRIEN: How about Julius Holmes?

KOMER: The very model of a modern major general and diplomat. We had a big run in with Julius Holmes at the time of the Iran task force. One of the conclusions was: We better get a heads up ambassador out there at the Shah's elbow. Julius Holmes was it. He was far less opposed to the rather radically different policy than he was to the idea that the Bundy State Department was apparently running it, on top of this the chief White House advisors on the new policy

included a very abrasive Budget Bureau guy, [Kenneth R.] Ken Hansen, who had been head of the Harvard mission in Iran. Julius was very edgy about the White House role in foreign policy, and he damn well let us know. I think we reached sort of a standoff. As I say, the disagreements were more over jurisdiction than policy. Julius really thought the State Department should run foreign policy and the President as well as his Bundy White House State Department should leave it to the professionals. In fact, he thought the Secretary of State should leave it to the professionals too. So a much more arms length relationship, but a successful one. Just a different problem with a different personality.

O'BRIEN: Okay, you mentioned amateurs now, that . . .

KOMER: Well, Ken Galbraith's view was all high policy should be run between the President and him personally. He was willing to accept that Bob Komer should be a staff officer in the process or occasionally Mac Bundy. As far as the State Department was concerned why didn't they keep their cottonpicking hands out of it and stick to visas and passports. In some respects, this grew out of Ken's particular personality and out of Ken's close relationship with not just John F. Kennedy but with Arthur Schlesinger, Mac Bundy, and the other Kennedyites. I happen to think Ken was a damn good ambassador. Ken's comments about bureaucracy in his book are understandable, all of which I had heard before at length from Ken because he and I were good friends. He damns the bureaucracy but doesn't realize that it's inevitable and necessary. And he is

much more critical of the bureaucrats than he should be. In other words, he blames the people rather than the system. I blame the system and am less critical of people.

O'BRIEN: Anyone else here that you would include in that category of the people that you directly dealt with?

KOMER: Well, Chet Bowles when he went out to India wanted to be a Presidential ambassador. And after all Chet was so senior that we had a massage problem in handling Chet. Not many others. In the Middle East/Africa, my parish, most of the ambassadors were professional, and those who were political were, with the exception of Ken Galbraith or Bill Attwood in Kenya, political pay-offs. In other words, they were political ambassadors, not professional amateur ambassadors or political amateur ambassadors. Just like you always reserve Ireland for a political.

O'BRIEN: In putting these letters together to people like Faisal and Nasser and Hussein, were all these done with the cooperation of Talbot, and did the ambassadors get into the writing in any stage?

KOMER: Almost every letter, with a few exceptions, was a collaborative product between State and myself and sometimes Defense and the Agency. Over time they began grudgingly to recognize that while the official drill was that they should draft the letter and we should rewrite it, it was much easier and less hurtful to their pride to let me draft it and they could rewrite it because my job was to write letters Kennedy style.

You know, Kennedy would look at these things, and he thought they were atrocious. It was as if they were written under water. They could have been written for any President. They were written for the record. They weren't Presidential communication. They were sort of like diplomatic notes exchanged at the summit rather than by foreign ministers or ambassadors. That's all. Kennedy felt that this was a critically important weapon of foreign policy; if he was going to be asked to sign a letter, it ought to sound like him and ought to say something. So with him over time I gradually did more of the drafting. Bundy did more of the drafting. Here was a place where I think Dean Rusk as well as Phil Talbot came to recognize the utility of the Bundy staff, because we as Kennedy staffers had great success in getting what State wanted said in an infinitely preferable way with far greater impact.

Now, the ambassadors. In some cases Kennedy would say, "I don't want to send this unless my guy out there, in whom I have confidence. . . ." It was frequently a Presidential delaying action. I remember on a couple of occasions we sent drafts out to Galbraith. Ken usually either rewrote the letter completely or was opposed to it. I used to suspect it was because he hadn't thought of the idea himself. He would come back with such things: "God damn it, I told Nehru this two weeks ago; therefore, why do we have to sign on the President?" et cetera. You knew that it was hurt pride on Ken's part. But on other cases he was right.

His rewrites were always good. He could write Kennedy style better than we could, or Galbraith style which he thought Kennedy style always aspired to. I happen to be an admirer of Galbraith's style. So was Kennedy, for that matter.

Pete Hart used to always submit drafts of the letters to Faisal. This was a peculiar art form. The Saudis are very conservative in the old Wahhabi tradition: seven pages of flowery introduction, a paragraph or two of substance, and then seven pages of flowery epilogue, all of which had to be rendered into Arabic because Faisal didn't speak any other language. Pete had outstandingly able Isa Sabbagh for his language officer, who later came back and served as Presidential interpreter. Pete, in the best tradition of an aggressive ambassador, would submit full texts of letters which he first did in Arabic then translated into English so they could be translated back into Arabic. He always used to come in with comments on our drafts too. So there was a case where an ambassador participated extensively.

Usually the ambassadors were either lazy or prudent. They were always appealing for Presidential letters. They would sometimes deign to say what they thought the main points ought to be, but they rarely deigned to give us drafts. This didn't bother us because in those few cases when they did, they were lousy, except for Pete Hart's or Galbraith's.

O'BRIEN: I can't remember whether we got it on tape or not, but you were talking about Bowles' memos coming in. What was wrong with Bowles' drafts?

KOMER: This was much more in the Johnson period than the Kennedy period because Chet was first Under Secretary of State and then Ambassador at Large. But he was appointed by Kennedy in '63. Chet regarded himself as a close Presidential advisor like Galbraith. The trouble with Chet is he's a very discursive--articulate, forceful, stimulating but long-winded drafter and talker. It was part of my job (Kennedy didn't want to waste that much time on a fifteen page letter or a fifteen page message) to boil it down or simply synopsize the damn thing. Bundy had a low threshold of tolerance for this kind of stuff, too. So, for that matter, did Dean Rusk. Chet just couldn't keep it down. If he was dealing with a relatively modest problem, he would give it a terrific wind-up by setting it in the context of India's whole past, present and future. You didn't need that.

I found Chet's prose fascinating. I used to write Chet, "You know he wants to listen to you, but cut down, for Pete's sake." And he'd come back and say, "Bob, thanks for clueing me. I know that. I'm trying to keep it down." Just his style.

With LBJ there was another problem. Kennedy was much more sympathetic to Bowles' pro-Indian views; LBJ had some policy reservations. Since I was very much on Chet's side, I kept a lot of this stuff from President Johnson just because I knew it would unnecessarily irritate him to see Chet be so anti-Pak and pro-Indian. You know, his prejudices were showing.

HANDLING ARAB-ISRAELI ISSUES

O'BRIEN: Let's get into some things about the UAR for a bit. Do you or does the President ever get involved in an attempt to open the Canal to the Israelis?

KOMER: Not a serious effort to my knowledge. That used to get raised periodically and was regarded as just like the refugee, Arab refugee, issue; was not regarded as a doable proposition. So I cannot recall any serious effort.

O'BRIEN: Well, there's a Pan-Arab Conference in 1961. The UAR takes a rather moderate kind of stance in this thing. They also got some PL-480 just before that. Are they linked together at all?

KOMER: I believe so. I believe that by that time we had gotten across to--what was the date?

O'BRIEN: I believe it was late 1961.

KOMER: Yes, I think it probably had some connection. Mind you, each foreign country that has important problems with the US--and there aren't too many, except the peanut ones, that don't--minds its P's and Q's in dealing with the new Administration in order to feel it out. Nasser was clearly hopeful that the Democrats coming in might prove to be more responsive than the Eisenhower-John Foster Dulles Republicans going out.

In fact, the change in our policy toward Nasser really began under Eisenhower. The first PL-480 I think went in '59, and there was some more in '60. So we had already, largely on humanitarian grounds, been shifting. It didn't become a conscious major policy initiative until the New Frontier came along, but as I told you,

there was that preceding effort by Harry Symmes and myself that got up to the NSC. We got it all the way to the NSC.

O'BRIEN: Well, now let's bring Gaud into this and AID. As I understand it, there's a disagreement over the length of time for these several AID agreements, and I think PL-480 comes into this. As I recall, AID wants to limit it to a one year basis rather than extending it over a. . . .

KOMER: No, that wouldn't be AID. I think that would be more . . . . It might be AID. At any rate, the argument was always between those who said, "Let's dole out in measured doeses, so that the other guy's appetite is always lean," and the others saying, "We've got to show a mark of confidence by having a longer term agreement"--I think it was three years versus one year. "Having a longer term agreement will show them we mean business."

O'BRIEN: Where did you stand on this?

KOMER: In the earlier phases I favored the longer term agreement; in the later phases I favored much shorter term ones. I shifted tactically. This is the difference between an operator and a bureaucrat--I always knew that three year agreements could be obfuscated, cut back, abrogated, stalled. So we could get the plus of a three year agreement while protecting ourselves against the minus.

O'BRIEN: Does he get involved with the Arab refugee thing where Myer Feldman went to Israel to talk to Golda Meir, and Badeau at the same time was dealing with Nasser?

KOMER: They went as part of the [Joseph E.] Joe Johnson exercise. Both went with briefs that were given to them by State and outselves (basically State) which had been approved by the President. Neither the State people nor ourselves had any great expectations that the rather sensible ideas of Joe Johnson would be acceptable, but we thought it was worth trying. It was a very complicated issue that I won't go into here. But we didn't get very far either in Cairo or in Jerusalem.

O'BRIEN: As I understand it, the Israelis and Myer Feldman felt, that somehow or another the agreement they arrived at had been sabotaged by State.

KOMER: This was a defensive reaction. That sort of accusation was flung about so frequently on so many things that I wouldn't have focused on it very much. You know, the Israelis were the best sea lawyers in the business. Let me tell you, they are tough, and when they don't want to do something, they can figure our ninety-five different shrewd ways, one of them being the best defense is a good offense. So they would come in and accuse us of leaking stories that the evidence was overwhelming they had leaked themselves. The Arabs tried the same things, by the way, in spades. They were just more inept.

So this was the kind of game that got played. This was a constant problem. Here we were dealing with two adversaries. We were in the middle. Anything we told one about what the other one might accept was automatically suspect. The Israelis would say,

"What right did you have to interpret us to Nasser?" And Nasser would say, "What right did you have to tell the Israelis that I might be willing to do such and such or so and so?" Given the atmosphere of mutual suspicion, running through that drill was really tricky, and it's not at all surprising that questions of bad faith kept cropping up.

We all knew that the likelihood of achieving either partial or complete negotiated settlements between Israel and the Arabs (which in effect meant between Nasser and Israel), that the probabilities were all against it. But we felt we had to keep that ball in play. Who knew when we might get a favorable break on some issue like refugees, where we thought we had a gimmick?

There are about a dozen different such things in my time that were tried out for size--none of them successful. Even if they weren't successful, they were very educational. They were educating both sides on what was doable and wasn't doable. In the Arab refugee thing, we were telling the Arabs, in essence, they couldn't depend on us to finance the refugees forever; we were telling the Israelis they'd better have some give in their position.

Lastly, it was not only useful as education, but it was a political imperative in order to maintain our overall policy of trying to move toward compromise settlements which would defuse great emotional issues which might drag in the superpowers.

So you have to go through the drill, and I will submit to you, since this is still a secret document, that the current exercise by

the Nixon Administration ever since Mr. Nixon sent [William W.] Bill Scranton to the Middle East before he came into office (I had a good talk with Scranton), is essentially another run at the same problem. No great expectations; odds very much against the successful outcome, but necessary for the various reasons I've given.

O'BRIEN: Now, Myer Feldman plays that role of broker in a sense.

KOMER: No. Disagree. I played the role of broker. Kennedy really played the role of arbiter. But Mike Feldman played the role of lawyer for the Israelis.

O'BRIEN: Okay.

KOMER: And I think that Kennedy, were he alive, would say the same thing. I gave both sides, and I think you would find interestingly that I am respected by the Israelis more as a fair-minded guy than Mike, although Mike was the lawyer they wanted, naturally.

O'BRIEN: Well, do any of those pressures spill over on you? Do you see, in your vantage point from the White House, the pressures, the domestic pressures of the American-Jewish community on the President?

KOMER: Certainly.

O'BRIEN: How about some specific instances? Can you recall some. . . .

KOMER: Sure, the annual aid level. We actually do provide aid, direct and indirect, to Israel since we did not want to provide them as a matter of policy with direct military aid. Even now we sell arms to Israel; we do not give arms as grant aid. We do give Israel loans at concessional terms. We did give them some grant economic aid. We do subsidize Jordan, Arab refugees, and a lot of other

things which are situations created by Israel. We do give them still PL-480 on very good terms. We do allow tax deductions for charitable contributions to the various funds. This all adds up to quite substantial indirect aid to Israel, and naturally the annual aid bargain became quite a political exercise in which all the boys were in through their lawyer, Mr. Feldman, and their other high priced counsel. This is quite legitimate, after all. Major American corporations do exactly the same thing. General Motors is lobbying in Washington a hell of a lot more than the Israeli government.

The Arabs are trying too. The only difference between the Arabs and the Israelis is the Israelis are just much better wired in and, more important, just much more competent, as gets proven every ten years. One saw all these pressures. They would peddle stories. Let me give you a good example. The Israelis naturally, in order to stimulate US Jewry to contribute more, would tend to play up the Arab threat, the arms that were being given by the Russians. They would tend to overstate this somewhat. The Israelis came up with the idea Nasser was building rockets with nuclear warheads. We destroyed the idea of nuclear warheads. The next thing was chemical warfare warheads. You may remember seeing a few things about the Egyptian use of poison gas in Yemen. That was blown originally by the Israelis, because indirectly it would prove their case that the Egyptians might use poison gas against Israel. How? With these rockets. So we destroyed that.

Mike Feldman--and honestly I think he would say the same thing--tried to be objective. He was just much more emotionally involved and much less savvy. After all, this wasn't his field. When it comes to textile quotas, Mike's a professional and I'm a layman.

But the Israelis would come up with these stories, usually indirectly through the American community. Some person of impeccable credentials who would then call Mike Feldman or come in and see him and say, "My God, we've got to get this word to the President. The Egyptians are developing rockets and nukes." Mike would go see the President or write him a memo saying, "Mr. President, this is the latest intelligence. It is a serious problem. We've got to do something." This would come to me, and I would say, "On the basis of the best intelligence, it just ain't so. The Egyptian rockets are old weather sounding rockets made by a couple of fourth rate German scientists who used to work for the French; then the French fired them, and the Egyptians hired them. The rockets have no warhead capability. They have no guidance system. They're no good. You can't put CW in them." Then the President says, "Okay. Go back, Mike, and tell your constituency that's the way that game goes."

The Israelis will naturally play up the dark side of their economic position; AID will naturally play up the bright side. Frankly, in many cases Israel just made a better case than AID. In any case, I was all for sensible indirect aid to Israel (as

long as it wasn't direct arms aid) which in effect kept a deterrent balance because the one thing we didn't want was for the Israelis to go nuclear. There is one good way to force the Israelis to go nuclear (which has then country implications far beyond Israel from our standpoint) and that is once they lose the prospect of an effective conventional deterrent. They're going to go to a nuclear deterrent, in my mind, almost unquestionably. Therefore, there's one good way for us to keep them from going nuclear: facilitate their maintaining an adequate conventional deterrent.

O'BRIEN: Now was that thinking present in the Kennedy Administration?

KOMER: Plenty. And articulated almost entirely by me, not by Defense, not by State. They used to send over this policy in thirty-five pages of obfuscated prose. I laid it on the line. This is the way a staff officer serves top management: explain to them in words of one syllable the real score. They were afraid to do that in State and Defense, in State because they were pro-Arab, in Defense because they were trying to get out of the military aid business to all these piddling countries.

O'BRIEN: And the President was cognizant of it?

KOMER: Cognizant, hell. He used to quote me.

O'BRIEN: One hears that charge, that the State Department, that NEA, is pro-Arab. Is there justification for that?

KOMER: Yes.

O'BRIEN: In the Kennedy Administration?

KOMER: Quite legitimately so. Certainly.

O'BRIEN: Why?

KOMER: Because State is naturally cast in that role as a deliberate, understandable counter to the great domestic pressures from the Israeli constituency on the White House. The Secretary of State is by definition (it's in his tacit job description) the spokesman for the evenhanded policy against all that political advice that is going to the White House on how to be pro-Israeli. Second, American business, insofar as it has any influence (the oil companies, et cetera) tends to be pro-Arab. Third, in terms of strategic geography, Israel is a millstone around our necks and known as such to all and sundry.

If it weren't that Israel were inhabited by Israelis--our policy would be totally different. You can make a very good case that it has been our commitments to Israel that have given the Russians great opportunities in the Middle East. I think that's a dangerously partial explanation because there were a lot of other things. The rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser was not because of the Arab-Israeli issue; it was because of the growth of Egyptian nationalism and booting out a peculiarly corrupt and inept monarchy. But there's no doubt about it that the problems with Israel gave the Soviets an opening with the radical Arab regimes which they're still exploiting.

Naturally, the State and Defense Departments at the professional level were Arabists. Our strategic and economic interests were emphatically with the Arabs. Only our political interest was

with the Israelis, and our political interest was being argued by somebody else. So I regarded it as one thousand percent legitimate that State and Defense, the professionals, tend to be pro-Arab, besides which there are thirteen Arab countries and just one little old Israel. Thirteen ambassadors go out to Arab countries. Do ambassadors learn to speak Hebrew? Hell, no. The Israelis all speak English. They learn to speak Arabic. And they become romantics about the Arabs, who are a very interesting crew, whereas the Israelis will hit you over the head with a meat ax. They hit me over the head many times, and I felt that the best way to handle that was to hit back; I think we had some interesting encounters.

I'm a great admirer of the Israelis, but I was calling them as I saw them in the White House. If I disagreed with Mike Feldman, I was ready to say so, besides which I was encouraged to do it. Just as the State Department is cast in an adversary role, so quite naturally the Bundy State Department Middle Easterner is cast in the role of being the debater with Mike Feldman or Larry O'Brien. Why? He's got to keep [Jacob K.] Jack Javits and a whole series of other guys happy on the Hill, and rightly so.

O'BRIEN: But in terms of the Arabists you have two different camps. You have one which I think you represent, which is the wave of the future. And then you have, well, guys like Parker Hart who look towards the more traditional kind of Arab leadership. Did you ever really have any knockdown drag-outs on policy questions?

KOMER: Not so much knockdown drag-outs, but quite active debate. For example, the conservative Arabists, Pete Hart and others, were strongly opposed to the opening toward Nasser. John Badeau originally was quite conservative on that, then became its most ardent advocate once he had thought the problem through. Pete Hart I think still feels that Phil Talbot and Rodger Davies and I were sort of naive. The young Arabists were all with us--the guys, let's say, under forty. The more senior Arabists tended to be more conservative, like Lewis Jones, George Allen. I don't remember where Armin Meyer stood. He's an interesting test case, would be in the middle.

O'BRIEN: How about Jernegan?

KOMER: Jack in the middle, too. I don't recall. I may be doing some of these guys a disservice.

O'BRIEN: How about a guy like Macomber who is not really an Arabist?

KOMER: Butts was quite an anti-Nasserite. He was a BYKer [Brave Young King]. And where was the great threat to Hussein? Not from the Israelis: from Nasser. So Bill was not very pro-Nasser.

O'BRIEN: Does the sale of Hawk missiles bring this whole issue of continued Israeli. . . .

KOMER: Yes. The sale of Hawk missiles ushered in a new phase of our Arab-Israeli policy because of a phenomenon no one had foreseen. Advancing technology plus political change was narrowing down the arms supply sources for Israel. Throughout the late forties and fifties we were able, by providing indirect economic aid subsidies to Israel,

to facilitate their getting arms, with our political support, from the French, from the British, from the Belgians and the Italians and, the Germans. The French probably sold more than the Germans did, but Israel got straight aid from [Konrad] Adenauer, part of the expiation for the sins of the Nazis. Then the German aid program began coming to an end. The French under [Charles A.] de Gaulle beginning in '58-'59 became very edgy, began a transition. And the British were getting more conservative. Besides this you had the advance of technology. Nobody else had a good cheap surface-to-air missile like Hawk and the Israelis buy only the most cost-effective things. So less and less were the Germans, British and French, even if they wanted to, able to provide the type of equipment which would match the Russian. As a result of these two tendencies, we almost inevitably became the targets. The Israelis said, "We can't get Hawks from anybody else." We said, "The British have a thing called Bloodhound." They said, "We've looked at Bloodhound militarily. Would you buy it for US forces?" And we said, "Hell, no."

So the Hawks marked the watershed. Since then, we've gone on from Hawks to A-4E's, tanks, now F-4's, et cetera.

We still, to the fullest extent possible, would like other Western countries to share. I think the Israelis are interested, too. They'd love to get those French Mirages instead of buying F-4's from us because ours are much more expensive. This is going to create over time a problem for Israel, but that's in the future and not the past.

At any rate, that was a major issue. We presented it on the grounds that there was no other realistic alternative if Israel was to maintain an adequate deterrent superiority, given all of the fancy jets that the Sovs were providing to Egypt, Syria and Iraq. So we had to modify our policy. I believe we did it rather adroitly, all things considered.

O'BRIEN: Well, one thing I was curious about and you didn't talk in your transcript about is in June of 1963, there's an attempt on the part of some pro-Nasser elements within Jordan to overthrow Hussein. As I understand it, over a weekend that became a major issue--something that the President himself was quite involved in, was a movement of a fleet and everything else. Do you recall anything about that?

KOMER: Funny, I do not recall.

O'BRIEN: At any rate, the Sixth Fleet was on its way to the eastern Mediterranean when I think Macomber turned him around.

KOMER: That would have been a turn around for a precautionary reason. If there were things involving Sixth Fleet or troops, I was far more involved than Feldman. Mike didn't have any of the intelligence clearances, for example. It's very interesting. Kennedy and Bundy didn't give them to him. They could have.

O'BRIEN: When he was in the White House?

KOMER: He wasn't in the foreign policy sector; he was on domestic policy. But if--I mean, this is a very significant factor. I had to always be very careful because we had really hard intelligence that Mike

never had. And Kennedy knew this, and Bundy said, "When we were having these debates, I would have to say, 'Mike, you know, you're just wrong. The Defense Department tells me or has actually got pictures.'"

O'BRIEN: Did you ever use Feldman, let's say, to communicate something to the American Jewish community?

KOMER: And how.

O'BRIEN: Do you have some examples?

KOMER: Unfortunately not. That was a constant maneuver on Bundy's part as well as mine.

Yes, I do have an example: this great Egyptian rocket scare. We laid out for Mike at great length all the reasons why this was all wet, not getting into intelligence sources but giving him the full classified conclusions. You know, they only have such and such a warhead weight. And we used Mike to go right back, said, "Tell your friends they're giving you a bum steer. Tell your friends that this is a propaganda exercise, that the US government has thoroughly looked into this matter and has reported to the President that there is no Egyptian rocket threat now or in the foreseeable future, and here's why."

Mike would go tell that to all these guys. Why? Because otherwise he was in the middle. He was trying to protect President Kennedy from pressure, so he had to go back and tell them, because he knew Kennedy knew, obviously. In fact, I have been at meetings when Kennedy would say, "Listen, Mike, go tell your friends what

Komer just told us. Clue them that I. . .. They're barking up the wrong tree. I don't have to give them fifty more planes, because there just isn't a rocket threat."

The Israelis were very well informed. We learned a lot about the Arabs from the Israelis.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any regular exchange of intelligence with them at that level?

KOMER: Negative. We did have an exchange of views. They would come in and present the threat to their security as the justification for more arms sales. We would give them our estimate of the threat to their security as the reason why we thought they were asking for too much at the wrong time of the wrong kind. That was an exchange of intelligence in a way. They didn't tell us their sources; we didn't tell them our sources. And we were very careful to protect what the Arabs told us, just as we were very careful to protect what the Israelis told us from the Arabs.

Now, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Every time the Arabs and Israelis got in a war the Israelis creamed them, which sort of proved that our views as to the deterrent balance were pretty sound, a point I have made to my Israeli friends since.

O'BRIEN: Did the [Ernest] Gruening study on foreign aid affect policy with Nasser at the Congressional level at all? Did you have any problems with this?

KOMER: In a very minor way, if at all, because Senator Gruening was regarded as a crank on the subject and did not swing that kind of weight in the Senate.

O'BRIEN: Well, let's get on to some questions dealing with Saudi Arabia. Going through the published stuff on Komer's War. . . .

KOMER: Lousy. There is no good published stuff on Komer's War. It's surprising how lousy the stuff is. Weintal and [Charles] Bartlett call it amusing, but it's a highly inaccurate account. There's this account in the Command and Staff School Journal. Did you read that one?

O'BRIEN: Which is nothing more than a plagiarism of Weintal and Bartlett.

KOMER: Exactly. All he does is take the title. So that's no good.

O'BRIEN: There are places in which the wording, with the exchange of a word or two, is precisely the same.

KOMER: Remember one of the things we all are very careful about was that Presidential staffers are anonymous. Now it was very hard for the number one boy, be he named Bundy, Rostow or Kissinger, to stay anonymous, as you can see from the cover page of Newsweek for the umpty-umpth time. But the more junior guys really stayed out of the limelight, and we were very careful. It was great to leak stories about the President when they were favorable. It was great to leak stories about the opposition when they were unfavorable,you know. But we did play the anonymity game, and very carefully. Then when LBJ came in he was even more insistent on it, and I think with reason. So the reason why it's so thin is they don't know the score. They were really just inferring.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about Saud's visit? Does this cause you any problems, embarrassments?

KOMER: Saud was a fool: dumb, dissolute, the very model of a non-monarch. His brother, Faisal, was the real brains of the show and running it. And thank God Faisal finally overcame his sensitivities over upsetting his brother when the rest of the family finally said, "You've got to take over. That guy's running this country to the dogs." So young Saud--not old Ibn Saud, who was a commanding figure--was a real pain in the neck to the Americans, to the British, to his own country, and his visits were just as bad. On the other hand, Faisal was a very impressive man, very conservative.

O'BRIEN: Did the lease issues crop up?

KOMER: I was never involved in that, and I think it came either at the end of the Eisenhower regime or very early in '61 before I got. . . . I think that the Kennedy Administration just signed off on a piece of business that had been staffed in the Eisenhower years. That issue was settled by the time I got the Middle East, which was mid-'61.

O'BRIEN: In this transcript you were talking in terms of oil and Saudi Arabia, and oil being the primary factor with Aramco [Arabian-American Oil Company]. One of the things that I think would be rather interesting to get into is the relations of a company like Aramco with the United States government.

KOMER: Far less directly influential than the mythology would have it. In my entire experience as the White House Middle East guy, I was never asked a single favor, never had a single bit of pressure put on me by the oil companies. Kim Roosevelt and [Christian A.] Chris

Herter, Jr., sort of made it a point to cultivate me. I had known Kim slightly before. We exchanged views. I was happy because this was part of the government's job to sort of clue these political advisors to oil companies on our views and on the situation. They naturally told me what they thought, and implicit in this was policy recommendations, but no attempt at pressuring. Nor did I get the feeling that the oil companies were going in over my head to Bundy or Kennedy. I think the President would have tried to sidestep them and send them back down. As happened with so many other things, they would have ended up back with me anyway.

This is what happened with the Israelis. You asked me if the Israelis ever tried to pressure me. The answer is by and large no. They were very cagey, very careful. Now, they tried to cultivate me. They were very attractive guys--some of them. Also, the Arab ambassadors tried to cultivate me, and I probably saw more of the Egyptian ambassador than I did of the Israeli ambassador. He was a very wise old hand.

O'BRIEN: But in terms of input, in terms of strategic implications of a place like Saudi Arabia, is oil in the minds of the people who are making policy?

KOMER: Yes. It comes out and hits you in the face. Oil and strategic real estate.

O'BRIEN: And it's the same with the consortium in Iraq as well?

KOMER: Yes, although Iraq was a smaller producer. In Iran, and how.

O'BRIEN: Aramco has this rather huge organization which is much like a state department in itself. While you were in there did we ever jointly do anything in the way of negotiations or representations to the Saudi Arabian government?

KOMER: No. That was mostly done by State. The oil companies did have much more extensive relations with State than they did with Bundy's State Department. Literally there just weren't enough of us. Now Mac knew a lot of these guys. Mac knew Kim Roosevelt. Mac knew Chris Herter, Jr.; he used to see him once every six months or so and steer him on to me. But they did not make a big thing of it. So the myth that I had expected, that the oil companies would be in there working on the President and Bundy, even Komer, was not the case. They may have tried to work on the White House through the State Department, but if so, they were turned off pretty successfully.

Here was where I was lucky. I didn't have to receive all these people or all the ambassadors and everyone else. Phil was the guy who had to go through all the meetings. Nor did Bundy have to. Poor Dean Rusk did. If the Egyptian ambassador wanted to make an official demarche, Mac didn't have to receive it, but poor Dean Rusk, at least two or three times a year, had to receive him, couldn't pass him off on Phil Talbot.

O'BRIEN: On this question of oil. As I recall, back in the early sixties there was a concern (I don't know whether this was propaganda of the oil companies or whether it was a legitimate strategic concern)

that the Russians were going to in some way or another build a marketing transportation organization and . . . .

KOMER: Never seriously a matter of concern because it looked so difficult.

O'BRIEN: Because of their lack of markets and excess of oil?

KOMER: The fact that they were competitors. Soviet oil was competing with Middle East oil in Japan and in Europe, and is doing it today. And Soviet natural gas as well. Moreover, the Soviets didn't have that kind of marketing organization. So while that problem was bruited, it was never regarded seriously.

O'BRIEN: Were the oil companies telling you this?

KOMER: To an extent. No, that was not a serious proposition.

O'BRIEN: Passing on to Iraq, how do you get along with a person like [Abd al-Karim] Qasim? Do you. . . .

KOMER: We didn't. He was a fanatic and we just didn't get along with him. I don't know that there were ever more than one or two very formal messages of birthday greetings, et cetera.

O'BRIEN: Did the movement in the direction of Kuwait cause you any real concern?

KOMER: We were concerned, yes. We joined with the Iranians and Saudis and British in trying to do what we could in a non-military way to turn that one off. And that later proved to be rather abysmal.

O'BRIEN: To the point of contingency planning in terms of military effort?

KOMER: If there was any, it was normal contingency planning not laid down by the White House. The military had contingency plans for everything. I have little doubt that in the normal course of our

relationships with the British we probably did some contingency planning against that possibility.

O'BRIEN: How about the British role here in these years? Is it a reluctant role on the part of the British?

KOMER: Reluctant, hell. The British were never reluctant to give us their advice at the highest level that they could plug into, and that was usually Macmillan to Kennedy.

O'BRIEN: The British, of course, have since started the process of withdrawal. Was there any indication in those years that they were. . . .

KOMER: Yes, the process of British withdrawal from east of Suez and west of Suez really began at the end of World War II. Once they gave India its independence, once they proceeded with Malaysia, once they. . . . The process in the eastern Med began with Greece in 1946 when they said, "Boys, you better take over because we can't fund this any more." So the process was continuing throughout the period. I attempted to argue this on a couple of occasions that we should try to discourage the British more effectively from withdrawing because inevitably we were going to be asked to fill the vacuum, as we had been indeed in every case since the end of World War II. It was a question of either us doing something or giving the Soviets a free ride. I even went so far as to propose to President Kennedy (this is a little thing I do not believe is in any of the oral histories) the so-called Eight Fleet.

O'BRIEN: This would be in the Indian Ocean?

KOMER: The Indian Ocean squadron. Looking at my area, I saw a serious power vacuum developing in the whole Indian Ocean-South Pacific area going all the way over to Indonesia. The British fleet which dominated that area was withdrawing gradually; the British were closing down bases and getting out. The Russians were already beginning to make noises and the Chinese were making noises at India. My point was we needed some mobile sea power there, sea power being peculiarly good because it saves us the political problem of having land bases from which we tend to get kicked out over time (just like any other power does). Aircraft carriers give you mobile bases. Bundy didn't think too much of the idea. McNamara and McNaughton didn't think too much of the idea, partly because they thought it was a quite secondary priority and would mean more money and more carriers when they were trying to hold down the military.

I was allowed by Bundy to make the case in a memo to Kennedy. Kennedy said, "Let's explore it." He was fascinated by the idea of an Indian Ocean squadron. And we did get the Defense Department to sort of start looking at the thing, and the only concrete result which ever emerged was the attempt to jointly develop an island base with the British at Aldabra or Diego Garcia, which later petered out. I still think that Kennedy was far more imaginative than McNamara or Bundy, and I think that we're going to find that this is a serious deficiency--that we do not have a way to project non-nuclear power into an exceedingly important Indian Ocean

area where countries like Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia are not unimportant to us in terms of resources, population, strategy, et cetera. I regarded this as a gap.

Fortunately, the Indonesian end can be handled by our capabilities in the Pacific. I pointed out that that was much harder when you moved over to the Bay of Bengal and west, especially with the Suez Canal closed.

O'BRIEN: Well, in those years, are the British saying to us at any time, "We just can't pull it any more. You're going to have to step in."

KOMER: The British were warning us that they couldn't carry it any longer. They were much too smart after their Greek experience to put it to us that boldly and crudely. They were offering us the option.

Now, I always thought that in many areas it would have been much cheaper for us to subsidize the British or go into joint tenancy with the British and, in effect, keep their power there. They were getting out primarily for economic reasons. They could no longer afford the burdens of empire at a time when the economic recovery of Britain was so important. If we could subsidize them, they were (in my view) more than willing to consider staying. Why do we build a great big new base at Subic Bay when the British have Singapore and when Lee Kuan Yew is more than bright enough to see the light?

There we discovered a peculiarly chauvinistic attitude on the part of our navy and a peculiarly moralistic attitude, I'll call it, on the part of Robert McNamara and McNaughton. They were flatly

opposed to subsidizing the British. "The British can afford it," they said. "You know, they're not that badly off." Maybe they were right.

It was clear to me that the only way we were going to keep the British there was to make it worth their while to stay. I was arguing for it. That also kept the United States at one remove. British relationships with India were much better than American relationships, and the Indians would have been much more tolerant of continued British naval presence in the Indian Ocean than of a new American naval presence arriving there. And it may come to that eventually; we shall see.

It would have been much cheaper to keep British troops in the Persian Gulf than to deny ourselves any such option. We're not going to put American troops in the Persian Gulf, not certainly with the Nixon Doctrine and in the aftermath of Vietnam. But a couple of companies of troops just make a big different in terms of deterrence. I'm not talking about getting involved. The whole art is preventive diplomacy. A network of pressures, deterrents, things that stop somebody from causing trouble in the first place. Perhaps somebody's going to try a coup in Dubai, which is now earning umpty-ump millions per annum in oil and which has maybe a police force of 124 guys. So let's say some Nasserite group is going to try and knock off the Sultanate of Dubai. That can be stopped by two companies of British troops which can be kept in the Persian Gulf area for one quarter the cost of two companies

of American troops. If it's in our interest to keep the British around there and if the British are willing to commit themselves to use them when jointly considered desirable (and since they, I think, get as much out of Dubai as we do) it would have been cheap at the price. But Defense couldn't see it.

O'BRIEN: Well, isn't the President as well as State and Defense a little bit reluctant to commit a small force of troops? Now, isn't that carrying over from Laos?

KOMER: And how. That's why I was proposing the alternative of keeping the Brits there. That's indirect diplomacy. Britain for three centuries subsidized others to fight her wars for her or deter them. The British would know exactly what we were doing. The thing is they wanted to do it for their own interest, too, at least their establishment did. And all I was saying is, "Help pay the bills. It's cheap at the price, and we'll never have to consider whether to put a few US troops in."

Incidentally, "Komer's War" was the deployment of the only US combat, or more accurately non-combat, force that went to the Middle East during the period. And it's perfectly clear where the President stood on that matter. He only authorized the deployment of task force whatever-it-was, those eight F-100s after the Saudis had given us all the undertakings which meant that they would not be used. That was pretty clever.

O'BRIEN: Did you have much dealings with the Hill on foreign aid matters?

KOMER: Not very much. Bundy was very insistent under both Kennedy and Johnson that we stay out of the Congressional line of fire lest we be exposed and our usefulness be destroyed. That was another thing that we left to the State Department and to the professional Congressional liaison people under Larry O'Brien. Moreover there's a very important precedent involved. If one or two White House staffers, however competent, go up to the Hill, then a precedent is established for all White House staffers, however incompetent, going up to the Hill. And wouldn't Senator [J. William] Fulbright love to get not only Mr. [Melvin R.] Laird and Mr. Rusk but Mr. Bundy and Mr. Rostow up before his committee on Vietnam? So the confidential relationship of staff officers to the responsible Executive was always pled as Executive privilege.

This was another thing that we didn't have to do like State did that permitted us to be a good deal more flexible. There wasn't going to be some Congressman able to call me up and say, "What advice did you give President Kennedy?" Whereas it was always possible that Phil Talbot would get called up and asked, "What advice did you give President Kennedy or Secretary Rusk?" et cetera.

Nonetheless I had to do a little private politicking. If Senator so-and-so bitched enough about why we weren't doing this or that (and he was important enough), the President would want to know, "What should I tell him?" Or the President would call Bundy and say, "So-and-so is kicking up his heels on this. Will you call him on the phone or go up and see him, or send Komer up to see him.

Let him know what the drill is." I had to do this on several occasions, under Johnson more than under Kennedy just because I was a more senior guy.

Incidentally, one of the first rules when dealing with the Congress is send the most important fellow you can, or have the most important fellow you can return the call. If Bundy gives them the answer, even though it's a less satisfactory one because he doesn't have the time to study the problem, it is better than Komer because they get offended.

So we provided a lot of briefs. Even so there were occasions on which I had to go up on one particularly sensitive problem or another and myself explain to Doc [Thomas E.] Morgan to [Clement J.] Zablocki, never in my business to Fulbright because Fulbright was always favorable to our Middle East policy, a couple of times to aides to congressmen particularly. Part of the game.

COUNTER-INSURGENCY

O'BRIEN: Well, in closing out I'd like to just do a little bit on this CI group. You mentioned a little bit of it in your transcript. You were with the original pilot group on this that was formed in the very early days of the Administration with Lansdale and Ramsey and Bissell and Rostow, I guess.

KOMER: It was my idea. I was the guy who proposed to Rostow and Bundy (and Walt was asked to pick up the ball) that we must find some way to deal with these incipient insurgencies. It was already apparent by 1961 that these sorts of things were coming and that we were not very well set up to deal with them.

O'BRIEN: Was this one of your original recommendations?

KOMER: Maybe so. At any rate it was my initiative. I was the first guy to propose that we better get organized more effectively to do something about the insurgencies which were already beginning to appear. The upshot of my pitch to Walt Rostow was Walt's pitch to, essentially, Dick Bissell, and we did have somebody from Defense and I think it was [Edward] Lansdale.

But at any rate, I remember our meetings, usually over in Bissell's office, in which we prepared a report; I had a good deal to do with the writing of the report. Hank Ramsey was the State staff officer. I was the staff officer to Rostow. Bissell participated largely himself, and I think Alex Johnson, maybe. I forget whether Alex or somebody more senior than Ramsey was involved. But it was out of our deliberations that there emerged the CI group. I had other, more elaborate plans in mind, but they did not come to fruition.

O'BRIEN: What were those?

KOMER: Well, I had been proposing some sort of an amalgamation of CIA and military para-military assets so that if we did get involved in things like Laos, we could handle them more effectively. You see, I think the United States has been remarkably successful in fighting a limited war in Laos by proxy below the level of visibility. Senator Fulbright ought to be complimenting the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson Administrations for their adroitness in actually keeping

our end up in Laos without the use of US combat troops or a formal US commitment of any kind. This is the cheap, sophisticated way to cope with that kind of problem. And at three hundred million a year it's very cheap at the price. When you look at thirty billion a year, it just looks great. It bothers me that Fulbright, who should be saying, "You kept us out of Laos; you've been very successful," is instead (as only Fulbright can) cooking the thing in the opposite direction for his own partisan purposes.

At any rate, the military had all the assets that would have to be used in a place like Laos, shall we say, but the Agency had the skills and tradecraft and the State Department had to give the political guidance. Therefore my proposal was to set up in peace time some sort of organization that would do contingency planning and prepare and train people for these things. Instead of having, as eventually developed in Vietnam as well as Laos, big bureaucratic infighting between the Pentagon and the CIA, we should get away from what was otherwise inevitable along those lines by developing cooperative procedures at the outset. These proposals just didn't get very far with Messrs. Bissell and Rostow and I forget who the Defense guy was. It may have been Nitze.

O'BRIEN: Well, was Robert Kennedy simpatico?

KOMER: Bobby came along later after the CI group was formed. Apparently his brother asked Bobby to keep an eye on this; maybe Bobby volunteered. Bobby was very interested in this whole counterinsurgency business, in the constructive aspects as well as the war aspects.

So Bobby sort of became an ex officio member of this rather flexible thing, and was a very stimulating and constructive influence.

O'BRIEN: Well, now you bow out of this somewhere along the line, don't you?

KOMER: I bow out of it relatively early because it turns out the CI group has most to do with the Far East. So Mike Forrestal, when he comes in, takes over as the secretary of the CI group and I just participate when they are dealing with a subject that is of concern to me. Then later when Mike leaves, I take over the CI group at the end, but conclude by this time that we have gotten sufficiently far along that this group is not really necessary.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any pilot programs, or did you have any particular nations that you were studying at this time? I know Thailand. . . .

KOMER: Yes, there were a whole series and I do not. . . . They were mostly Far East. We did study Iran. You see, those were out of my bailiwick. Probably did. I think Burma was on the list.

Now, my next intervention is the revival of the so-called Public Safety Programs, where I wrote a memo to Kennedy saying his new AID chief was about to abolish them.

O'BRIEN: President Kennedy had quite an interest in them, too. One final question I'd like to pop. Back in 1961, you were talking about this counterinsurgency thing you were involved in which is really an entirely new different policy direction in cold war conflict. We're now in 1969 when there are some rather obvious failures of American policy, some less identifiable successes. How do you feel about those directions in 1961?

KOMER: We were going in the right direction. What we did was almost all of it useful and commendable. With the wisdom of hindsight, however, it is painfully clear that we didn't go half far enough. If we had really studied and developed not only concepts but also programs for dealing with insurgencies of the sort that were already emerging in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and other places, we would have been able, I think, to do much better in countering them or in minimizing their consequences without having ended up (following a series of half measures) facing the awesome choice we finally made, i.e. that the only way to save our position in Vietnam was direct US intervention in 1965. This then led us, of course (since any President is also a politician) to the feeling we had to get this thing settled and under control before the 1968 election, which meant, almost inevitably, Americanization of the war.

Now, it's easy for me to say, and I'm sure most people would agree, that we should have devoted one hell of a lot more attention, effort, resources, et cetera, to dealing with counterinsurgency problems by indirect means. Many of course would argue that we shouldn't deal with counterinsurgency at all; we should just leave those things to fate. I don't happen to agree with that, nor did President Kennedy. But our failure to do enough about counterinsurgency programs, I think was one of the reasons why we ended up faced with awesome intervention. A lot more could have been done.

By and large counterinsurgency programs are cheap; can be plausibly deniable in many cases; and need not lead, in my view,

to commitment of the sort that Fulbright is always talking about. Here again is a really false analogy on Fulbright's part that aid leads to commitments, commitments lead to interventionism. I would argue that aid which permits countries to stand on their own feet reduces the real likelihood that you will have to intervene. Moreover, commitments plus aid--treaty commitments or declaratory commitments--have a major deterrent impact which leads the other side to raise serious questions in its own mind as to whether it ought to intervene and create an insurgency. I think the history of the post-war period would demonstrate that by and large aid, commitments, and warnings reduce the likelihood of situations requiring intervention. It was the very dustiness of our policy in Vietnam, similar to the very dustiness of our policy before Korea, which in a sense dragged us in. So that instead of Mr. Fulbright saying, "Don't make any commitments," you could just as well make the case on the other side.

ENVOI

O'BRIEN: Any parting shots?

KOMER: Well, one in particular, Dennis. As we've remarked on several times, you're interviewing me many years later, and the human memory is particularly fallible. I may have stated certain propositions with more vehemence than I felt at the time; I may have stated others with less vehemence than I felt at the time. It should all be taken with certain grains of salt. But I think most of the issues we dealt with in this interview are a sort where recollection is reasonably good; we aren't dealing with the actual facts, dates, precise details. However, that general demurrer.

Looking back on it all I am fascinated to see that present observers and historians are saying that the Kennedy policy toward the Middle East was a remarkably successful one compared to what happened before, the dustup with Nasser over Suez and the Aswan Dam, or after it, the 1956 dustup between the Arabs and Israelis and its aftereffects. I think it's partly because we were adroit and partly because we were activists, though not interventionists--the opposite. I also think it suggests that style is important and that innovation and freeing up imaginative, innovative diplomacy through some such device as a Bundy State Department tied-in to a remarkably good group of political appointees does have a degree of payoff.

Now I suspect, unfortunately, that you could take the history of our policy in Southeast Asia, where there were also very bright--just as bright--guys, and arrive at the opposite conclusion. Despite innovation and imagination, despite some very bright fellows dealing in a relatively permissive policy atmosphere with an activist and adroit President, we did rather poorly to say the least. So my generalization may not be as valid as I'd like to think.

O'BRIEN: Well, from the beginning of the Sixties to the end of the Sixties, thank you, Robert Komer, for a very informative interview this afternoon.

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