William H. Sullivan Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 6/16/1970
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William H. Sullivan (1922-2013) was the U.N adviser to the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs in the State Department (1960-1964); Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (1963-1964); Ambassador to Laos (1964-1969). This interview focuses on Sullivan's role within the State Department, John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s handling of the political crisis in Laos, and U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, among other issues.

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William H. Sullivan—JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM H. SULLIVAN

June 16, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Of course, the question is when did you first meet President Kennedy?

SULLIVAN: I think I probably first met him, although I have no specific recollection of him as an individual, when I met a bunch of the young Kennedys shortly before World War II down in Hyannis Port. But the first time that I can identifiably remember meeting him was when he was a young congressman in about 1950. He came through Japan when I was stationed there in what was then our political adviser's office to General MacArthur [Douglas MacArthur].

O'BRIEN: Did you have any contact with him?

SULLIVAN: Only briefly at that time. I think he probably was traveling alone. I don't remember him traveling with any other group of congressmen. He was, I recollect, a tall, very thin, and very bushy haired young man at that time. And we talked a bit about the situation that we were trying to establish in terms of a military security agreement with the Japanese at that time. He was on a quick trip going, I think, down toward Southeast Asia.

O'BRIEN: I understand on that trip that, at least in some places in Southeast Asia,

some of the foreign service people found him a little bit abrasive. Did you have that impression?

SULLIVAN: No, at that time I found him -- of course in Tokyo -- a little less than serious. He seemed to be rather jocular and a little bit flippant about the whole situation there and not

necessarily making a very studious effort at that time.

O'BRIEN: When do you see him again?

SULLIVAN: Not until he became president, I think. I don't recall ever having seen him. I was out of the country, of course, most of the time. I don't recall having seen him at all during the period before he became president.

O'BRIEN: Well, backing up a little bit into the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] years, you became UN [United Nations] adviser in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs in 1960. Can you briefly discuss what that entailed?

SULLIVAN: Its principal function, I suppose, at that time, was to concern itself with the question of membership of the Chinese, well, not membership but representation of the Chinese Communists and the preservation of the representation of the Chinese Nationalists. But essentially, it was a function in which any interests that Asian countries had in the proceedings of the United Nations were reflected through my office. And also, any interest that we had that concerned Asia that had some association with the United Nations would go through that office as well. But the prime effort, and it took most of our time, was this whole question of China's representation.

O'BRIEN: I understand at that time, just prior to the coming of the new administration, you had a review of policy and a number of things were suggested.

SULLIVAN: After the elections of 1960 there was a suggestion by the outgoing administration that all policy should be reviewed and all sorts of thoughts should be put on paper for review by the incoming administration.

O'BRIEN: Did you make any recommendations along the line for, let's say, a two-China policy?

SULLIVAN: I made recommendations which I suppose could be called a two-China policy. It was, in effect, a successor state arrangement in which both the

Chinese Communist and the Chinese Nationalists could have seats in the General Assembly. The question of how the Security Council's deal would be worked out was a little more complex and was not really addressed in this paper. It was merely concerning itself with the General Assembly problem.

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O'BRIEN: Did you run into any resistance to that, let's say, first of all, within the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs?

SULLIVAN: Well, this was a fairly freehanded operation. We were permitted to make any proposals that we wish. As I recall, my proposal at that time went up to the then assistant secretary of state, Jeff Parsons [J. Graham Parsons], and he had no objections to it. In fact, I think he endorsed it onward to the people who had come in from the new administration who were sort of sitting alongside here in the department. We had a whole group of them, as you may recall, down here on the first floor of the Department of State. These people were circulated through them. And I'm quite sure, in this instance, that our then assistant secretary, Jeff Parsons, endorsed this one on for them to read.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get any indication of the response of Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk] and the White House?

SULLIVAN: I don't know that I ever discussed it with Secretary Rusk. I know that several people did read it, including, I'm told, President Kennedy. The people from whom I have heard comments and responses were people like Averell Harriman and Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith]. I can't recall all of the ones that….

O'BRIEN: Is the major roadblock at this point basically the President and his response to Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] -- in changing China policy towards…

SULLIVAN: Well, there had been -- in 1961, there was considerable climbing aboard this idea by the administration and considerable interest in the White House and in the Department of State in pushing it ahead. Then we came up against some harsh political realities. I never knew exactly what was the final thing that caused President Kennedy to decide not to go along with it. He had a visit at that time, as I recall from…. I can't remember whether it was…. It couldn't have been the prime minister of China. It was somebody, anyway, from Taiwan. And there were several other discussions, including, I think, one with President Eisenhower. But the net result of it was that for political reasons we decided to put it off in '61 and I think, subsequently, in '62. Sixty-two -- by that time, of course, the Chinese had attacked India, and so the whole thing had become pretty moribund. In '61 it came very close to being endorsed as our governmental position.

O'BRIEN: I suppose the big problem that you're dealing with at that time was Laos, isn't it?

SULLIVAN: In '61 I began dealing with Laos. I hadn't had much to do with it up until then. But on January 1 of '61, I remember making my first suggestion on how we might deal with the presence of Laos. From then on in, I'm afraid, I was pretty well sunk into it.

O'BRIEN: At this point, as I understand it, there's a great deal of deterioration in the whole political situation in Laos.

SULLIVAN: In '61?

O'BRIEN: In early '61, in January. What, in terms of policy, are we trying to attempt to do?

SULLIVAN: Well, in terms of policy, in January of '61 my feeling was that we shouldn't be so much hung up on the idea of territorial integrity for Laos; that Laos really was more of a geographical expression than it was a state that had rigid boundaries; and that we should look to that portion of the country which we felt was of strategic and interested importance to us. And essentially, we should look to preserving in friendly hands that strip which was along the Thai border and that strip which was along the South Vietnamese border. If the communists had control of the area along the North Vietnamese and Chinese border, up there in the northeast of Laos, that really shouldn't worry us too much, and we should find some cosmetic way to sort of paste this over. What I was proposing was a system in which, without surrendering the concept of the state of Laos, de facto control over that area could remain in communists' hands, provided friendly control existed in the areas that were contiguous to South Vietnam and contiguous to Thailand.

O'BRIEN: Is there a division of policy within the department here, at that point?

SULLIVAN: At that point, yes. The then assistant secretary of state, Jeff Parsons, had just been the ambassador to Laos before that, and the idea of permitting Laos to be even de facto carved up this way was an anathema to him. And there were a lot of other people who felt that way. Interestingly enough, the Laos desk officer did not. He felt that this was probably a sensible and a practical way of handling this thing because otherwise, it would involve having to send United States forces in, and he, knowing Laos pretty well, didn't think that was a feasible thing to do.

O'BRIEN: How are Ambassador Brown [Winthrop G. Brown] and Parsons getting along? Were there any conflicting view there?

SULLIVAN: Not in views. As you may know, Brown and Parsons were old, old friends. They were roommates in school together and then classmates in college together and, personally, very compatible people. I think Win Brown may have been a little more subtle and, being on the spot in Laos, a little more concerned about reaching some pragmatic ways to handle this situation and not standing fast on the more specific ideological or more specific cartographic lines that Jeff stood on.

O'BRIEN: Just a little earlier than that, he and, as I understand, Admiral Riley [Herbert Riley] and John Irwin had done to Laos.

SULLIVAN: I don't remember the date on that. That was, I guess, just after the coup that Kong Le pulled there. Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] was down south. They'd gone out, the three of them together -- Jeff got rather a black eye out of that because I think that he was dealing in good faith with Souvanna [Souvanna Phouma], but some of the members of that team were not dealing in the same straightway with him. I think that some of the promises and statements that he made, with authority from Washington, to Souvanna were undercut by some of the other members of the operation.

O'BRIEN: Well, did either Irwin or Riley ever tell Phoumi not to listen to Brown?

SULLIVAN: Oh, there are allegations that statements of that type were made, but I've never seen proof of that.

O'BRIEN: Well, what is that division -- now, apparently, there's a division there between the other agencies that are involved and the other departments that were involved in…

SULLIVAN: Laos was a mess from '58 to '60 when Horace Smith was ambassador there. We had at that time, I think also, something of a disintegration of control here in Washington. Of course, Dulles [John F. Dulles] had died. The President had had his heart attack and was sort of fed up with the whole way the business was run. Interestingly, the only control in central government here at that time was Andy Goodpaster [Andrew J. Goodpaster], who was in the White House, and this was reflected in the field. It was also reflected in the way in which the internal functions of the Laos embassy were held together. At that time, CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] reported separately to its people; the Defense people reported straight to the Joint Chiefs of Staff or to the Defense Department. There wasn't the tight sort of control.

In fact, primarily because of the way in which Laos control slipped, President Kennedy did send that letter of his in May of 1961 in which he put the authority in the field and in the embassy under the direct supervision of the ambassador. Laos was the horrible example that was always cited as the need for doing something that would make sure you had centralized control. At that time, there was a country team board of directors complex both in the field and also here in Washington. So there was not that tight degree of discipline that should have existed.

I think the mission that went out there, representing a similarly lax degree of discipline back here, ran into this situation there in which CIA had pretty much -- in conjunction with the military representative -- decided that Phoumi was the ideal man. And they helped him through this coup d'etat operation. Win Brown then came in and tried to re-establish authority after Horace Smith left. And it was at this time that the group went out there. So that was the circumstances under which they went at that time.

O'BRIEN: Well, in terms of some of the other embassies in Southeast Asia, is there conflict between these embassies, let's say Phnom Penh and Saigon, at this point?

SULLIVAN: Well, Saigon itself was something of a mess at that time. Durbrow [Elbridge Durbrow] was our ambassador there, and they had "Hanging Sam" Williams [Samuel T. Williams] as the military man, MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group]. Durbrow, I remember visiting there in '59 or '60, was aware of the fact that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were establishing guerilla warfare. He thought that there should be a military establishment that was tailored to deal with that sort of operation. "Hanging Sam," on the other hand, was convinced that the only way Asian communists attack was right straight across the demarcation line like they did in Korea. So he was building up a large conventional army. The atmosphere there was not very good.

Cambodia, I don't recall at that time. It's a long ways back. As I recall, we had fairly gentle ambassadors there at that time like Carl Strom or…

O'BRIEN: Trimble [William C. Trimble].

SULLIVAN: …Bill Trimble and the third one was -- well, I don't remember. Anyway, I don't think any of them would have been in a circumstance where they'd be gnashing their teeth over Laos. And I can't remember who was -- Ken Young [Kenneth T. Young] wa sin Thailand once the Kennedy administration came in, but who his

predecessor was, I don't recall.

O'BRIEN: It was Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson], wasn't it?

SULLIVAN: It was Alex, yes. Sure, it was Alex. And of course, there was no bad rub there. I don't know of any…. If your question suggests that some of the embassies in Southeast Asia were at odds with our ambassador in Laos, I don't think that's true at that time.

O'BRIEN: Well, in terms of carrying out policy and accomplishing policy here in Washington, you're working, of course, at that point under the old NSC [National Security Council] structure. What are the problems, let's say, of people at this end of things in attempting to put a policy through? Are you pretty much outgunned when you get to the OCB [Operations Coordinating Board] and the NSC at this stage?

SULLIVAN: Well, it all depends how you do it. I remember in about '58 or '59, I guess, I did manage to get one piece of policy through the OCB-NSC structure in connection with Burma. I got an AID [Agency for the International Development] program for the Burmese that we had promised them and which the Pentagon was then welching on because they'd had some budgetary cuts and decided they didn't want to do it. Mr. Herter [Christian A. Herter] was then our secretary of state because it was just after Foster Dulles had died, and once I got him convinced that there was an obligation here that we had to meet, he really felt that there was a question of national honor at stake, and so he said we'll go ahead and do this. I then managed to get enough people lined up in the various agencies and departments that were concerned so that we coordinated this thing through the OCB and the NSC structure, and eventually, the Defense Department had its feet held over the fire, and we finally came through on the thing. But it took weeks, if not a couple of months, as I recall to do this. It was a very clumsy and a very paper prone organization.

O'BRIEN: Now what are the differences once the Kennedy administration comes in and you start using task forces.

SULLIVAN: Well, that's a little hard for me to put my finger on it the same connection because what happened to me shortly after the Kennedy administration came in was to find myself over in Geneva in the Laos talks. And by the time I came back from those talks I had -- I'd been pretty closely associated then with Averell Harriman, and this led me into a position where I guess I was

in much closer contact with the power elite of the Kennedy administration than the average fellow of my grade and rank was in the Department of State. Moreover, I was working from then on directly with Averell. So when I was calling to get something done, it usually wasn't just on account of myself; it was on behalf of Averell Harriman, which made things move an awful lot faster.

But things could move much faster because it was a much less rigid structure; and it moved very much, I think, on a basis of personal communication, very much on a basis of what our current secretary of state calls ad hoc and ad hominem. It was all quite depersonalized in the last stages of the Eisenhower administration, and it became quite personalized in the Kennedy administration.

O'BRIEN: Well, is it fair to say that -- you know, during the last of the Eisenhower administration, is it fair to say…. Well, let's take the CIA as an example. Do they have much more of the ability to initiate certain things? I'm thinking in terms of the direct support situation, their involvement in Cambodia as well. Were they able to initiate much more than perhaps be directed to do things by the departments….

SULLIVAN: Oh, yes, I think it's true for several reasons: one, of course, you had Allen Dulles who was head of it. And so long as Foster was here in this department, he and Allen could just agree on something, and that would be about all the clear-offs that Allen had to get. And then Allen went busting ahead on it. Secondly, they had a lot more money and a lot less severe supervision from the Hill. And, thirdly, they had an awful lot of talented people. I think the CIA had a lot of people who were extremely good. I certainly saw them in Europe. By and large, in our European embassies I would be pretty hard put to say that the CIA people weren't better than the average of our people. Now, these were young fellows, most of them, who saw this as a way of moving ahead more rapidly and who liked power and liked authority and liked action, and, therefore, they did move that way. They did not like discipline in the more traditional sense, and this was an asset as well as a liability.

O'BRIEN: Well, does the department, people in the department, see the change in administration as an opportunity to put the brakes on, particularly some of the activities?

SULLIVAN: I don't think so. I think in some areas they did, but I certainly think that as far as the field was concerned there was a great feeling -- and I can say a lot of it came from this situation in Laos. But my suspicion would be that none of

this really came to a head until after the Bay of Pigs. At that stage there began to be a real searching of the mind and searching of the soul as to whether we really did have a system that was responsible. And I think it was at that stage that the President produced his letter to bring these people under control or bring the whole American overseas operation presence under some form of control.

O'BRIEN: Well, in your judgment, from your own experience, does the trend in this direction, which the letter sort of signifies, does it really come about? Are

the department and the ambassadors able to really take…

SULLIVAN: Well, I think that the answer is yes, if the ambassador will do it. Certainly in my own experience in Laos I never had any qualms whatsoever because I insisted on the agency people following my direction. And they played very square ball with me; I never had any problems with them. There were only one or two times that I did have any minor problems, and I emphasized this by throwing people out of the country, which made it quite clear. [Laughter]

O'BRIEN: Well, what kind of contacts do you have with members of the incoming administration before it actually comes into power? Did you, for example, brief anyone?

SULLIVAN: I don't really recall. I don't think so. No. I remember doing these papers, as I said. The particular one I did was the Chinese representation paper. But I don't recall any contact of any special type until the administration was actually sworn in.

O'BRIEN: Well, when that happens, do you feel that some of the members of the administration that are coming in that don't have and haven't had a very close contact with things in Southeast Asia and the Far East? Did you feel that they had a pretty good grasp? Let's say, first of all, Secretary Rusk? Of course, he has a background in it.

SULLIVAN: Well, Rusk, of course, had a very deep background in Asia. As a matter of fact, I guess Rusk was one -- you asked about contact with the new administration. When he was named to be secretary, but before the administration took office, I remember he wandered in here on ebay. And he's about the only person, I guess, that I did meet at that time, prior to the administration taking over.

Of course, his selection for assistant secretary for Asia was Alex Johnson. And then Alex never took the job because he went up and

took the deputy under secretary's job, and they brought in Walter McConaughy who didn't last very long because he didn't quite fit with the pace and the tempo and the tenor of the new administration.

O'BRIEN: How about the bureau's view of McConaughy? Were they satisfied with McConaughy?

SULLIVAN: Well, all of us had known Walter for a long time. He used to be the ambassador in Burma when I was the Burma desk officer. And Walter is a

very competent and a very straight shooting fellow. But it was quite clear that he was in a league that he hadn't had much experience with and he wasn't temperamentally or intellectually attuned with. So I think he was happy that -- he was really overwhelmed while he was here and happy to leave when he left.

O'BRIEN: Well, in 1961, how do you look at the relation of Laos and Vietnam, at this point?

SULLIVAN: Well, at that time the relation was much more keenly attuned to Thailand -- Laos and Thailand. People were worried about the fall of Laos in terms of its effect upon Thailand with which we had an alliance much more so than they were concerned about the Ho Chi Minn Trail's effect upon South Vietnam. As a matter of course, that was the time of the Taylor [Maxwell E. Taylor]-Rostow [Walt W. Rostow] report and so forth. Laos and South Vietnam were not that closely linked in the official mind or in actual military contact because the fighting was very largely in the north and northeast of Laos, and the southeast portion, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was relatively quiet.

O'BRIEN: Well, initially, we had a task force which is formed on Laos early in February of 1961. Did you get involved in that?

SULLIVAN: No, I wasn't involved in it at that time. I can't remember who was.

O'BRIEN: I think John Steeves was involved in that as one of the members. Parsons was on it, too. Well, initially, before you go to Geneva, is there any difference in the bureau here and in the State Department on the direction of the policy working toward the neutralization of Laos, at that point?

SULLIVAN: Well, I think conceptually everybody talked in terms of neutralization, but in practical terms, each person's definition of it varied considerably. I think John Steeves

and some of those you might call more hawkish felt the terms of neutralization was that we go clear their clocks first and get these people out of there. Then we get out and let Laos become neutral. That was one extreme, if not one limit, if I may say so. And the other limit was…. And there weren't too many who were keen on sort of waffling out. Now Chris Chapman [Christian A. Chapman], I guess, was the Laos desk officer. Chris was pretty much prone to not get very deeply involved in this whole thing and to settle for what we could. And I think his precepts came closer to what we ultimately settled on. The influences at that time, a great many of them, were external. The French had one input and the British another. So there were not so much internal differences as there were external ones coming from various quarters.

O'BRIEN: What was your own feeling toward Phoumi and towards, let's say, the formation of a neutral nation's commission in terms of this situation at that time?

SULLIVAN: Well, I frankly don't remember too much of that time. I was, I guess, still spending most of my functions at that time on the United Nations and not too much in connection with Laos. As I said, early in January I got involved in it with the suggestion that there ought to be some pragmatic parceling out of areas with territorial control and being sure that we limited our control and have this papered over in some way. But that wasn't too popular a view at that time, so I didn't press it, and I didn't get involved in the whole problem. I didn't really get involved until some where around late May or June when they actually -- well, I guess in May when the idea of a conference began to gel. In fact, I guess when it had been agreed in principle that there would be a conference, Ken Young took on some sort of task force for the creation of papers for this thing. And I was asked to participate in that. It was a mammoth thing; it must've been twenty-five people on that. So when they began proliferating papers, and, after a while, two or three meetings, I saw this wasn't going to get much of any place, and moreover, that there were so many people that I figured I could slip quietly out and not be missed, and so I did and I wasn't. So I didn't have anything to do with that for a time.

O'BRIEN: Well, did the question ever come up in the talks that we were carrying on in Warsaw with the Chinese, at that point, before the actual beginning of the Geneva Conference?

SULLIVAN: I have a vague recollection that something did come up and something was said at that time, but I can't pin that down.

O'BRIEN: You don't happen to recall what kind of responses we're getting from the Chinese?

SULLIVAN: No, I don't. But I have a vague feeling that we did raise it at that time.

O'BRIEN: Well, how do you see the Bay of Pigs and its impact on Laos? Any relationship at all?

SULLIVAN: Oh, I think there was a very direct relationship. First of all, there's the institutional one that we spoke about, that the President became concerned with the way in which the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and whatnot were freewheeling a bit and decided he'd better tighten up administratively overseas. So that's one effect that was not specifically directed toward Laos, but of which Laos, being such a horrible example, was also a beneficiary.

The second thing was, I think, that, having been burned by the Bay of Pigs, the President was going to be very cautious in accepting advice about how simple and easy it would be to send in a bunch of Green Berets and sort of wind this thing up in Laos in rapid form. So I think it introduced a note of considerable caution as far as his attitude toward military possibilities in Laos was concerned.

Thirdly, I think in view of the ultimate way in which the Bay of Pigs evolved, when the President asked the Joint Chiefs for an evaluation of what he could do militarily in Laos, they played the role of super caution on their own side and said that they could guarantee a military victory provided they had a free hand up to and including the use of nuclear weapons in China. And that had the result of turning him off pretty rapidly. So I think all of these things did have a very direct and very significant impact on Laos.

O'BRIEN: Well, what happens to Phoumi's star in Washington? He isn't very successful in that first part of 1961.

SULLIVAN: Well, Phoumi always -- I think even among those who were his most avid supporters there was some understanding that Phoumi was a bit of a rascal, and they just thought that he was a tolerable rascal. Many others considered that he was not. Phoumi, of course, demonstrated that militarily he was no great shakes. And secondly, by comporting himself in such a way that he was attempting to squeeze the United States, and a good deal fo it was sticking to his own hands or that of his family or that of his colleagues, he became far less popular around here, even among some of his previous supporters, than he had been up until that time. As I say, in 1959, 1960 when Phoumi was being pushed forward, he was being pushed first by the French, who thought he was great. Then they became a little disillusioned, and they handed him over to the Americans. And then

he was being pushed by the CIA and by some of the military. But his popularity was not always a 100 percent among all sectors of the Washington community, even during the Eisenhower administration.

O'BRIEN: Who were his detractors at that point, do you recall, particularly over in Defense and the CIA?

SULLIVAN: Well, I can't -- I think Des Fitzgerald [Desmond Fitzgerald] in CIA, who was then head of the Far East branch, was not all that enchanted by Phoumi. Bill Bundy [William P. Bundy] who was then in Defense was not all that keen on Phoumi either. And there may have been others, but those are the only two that occur to me just now.

O'BRIEN: Well, when does the decision to back Souvanna Phouma take place -- develop?

SULLIVAN: Well, that's a fairly complex thing, but fundamentally, it was when Averell Harriman went out to Delhi, I guess, and met him there. He decided that he liked the cut of his jib and also decided that what he was saying made sense. And I would say he, more than anyone else, was the one who latched on to Souvanna as a potential. Win Brown, I think, had more confidence in Souvanna than he had in Phoumi. Chester Bowles, who was at that time -- let's see, was Chester here? I guess he was still here. Again, he was being put forward by the French and by the British. And again, people like Chris Chapman, who had known him, felt that he had more substance to him than Phoumi.

O'BRIEN: Is there any resistance here that you recall?

SULLIVAN: Oh, yes. General Heintges [John A. Heintges] who was head of the PEO [Programs Evaluation Office], so-called, out there in Laos, thought he was great. Some of the subordinates in the CIA, certainly the station chief and a few others. And I'd say, in general, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and such organizations were supporting him loyally.

O'BRIEN: Well, when Harriman goes to Geneva the President gives him his instructions. Did you get any insight into this? Well, the instructions, of course, as I understand it, were very broad and all. Did you get any insight into the way Harriman interprets those instructions?

SULLIVAN: Well, Harriman is a fairly cagey, old fox who'd been around through a number of presidents, and he pretty much set up his instructions the way he liked them to be set up, which

gave him the greatest degree of possible latitude, and claimed that this was the way Franklin Roosevelt gave instructions, and this is the way they should be done. I think he made quite sure that President Kennedy did not stipulate instructions so narrowly that it left him any problem of interpreting them any way he wanted to. He just had a general meeting of the minds with the President that this was the objective that he'd be pursuing and they'd leave the tactics pretty much up to him. And I think President Kennedy, my general impression was, had enough confidence in Harriman to at least let him have a try at this and not keep too rigid a rein on him.

Of course, you must remember that in the first hegira to Geneva this whole troop that went over -- Dean Rusk, of course, went first. He was there only for a couple of weeks. And Averell was deputy, and we had -- I wasn't there then -- but they had a whole retinue of all sorts of people. And instructions were piled in this great paper factory that Ken Young had back here with the departmental people who put forth papers. I don't think Averell ever read one of them. But I'm also sure that the President didn't, so they didn't constitute instructions,

although they were position papers that people placed great store by, the bureaucratic group that was in the delegation.

O'BRIEN: Is there any question about the seating of the Pathet Lao?

SULLIVAN: Yes, there was. Again, that was before I came to Geneva. That decision was made during Rusk's tenure as delegation chairman. And I gather that this was one which the British and the Soviets pretty much hashed out as co-chairmen, and one in which their position was ultimately obtained.

O'BRIEN: How does Harriman feel about it? Did he have any objections?

SULLIVAN: He told me later that he did and that he wouldn't have done it quite that way. I'm not quite sure that he had been in the position that Rusk was in that there was any other way that he could have done it. Anyway, for the record, he claimed to have been opposed.

O'BRIEN: Well, then you, in a sense, become chief of the missions by some rather devious means, as I understand.

SULLIVAN: Well, not entirely. What happened was that Harriman was left behind to be head of the delegation, and he felt he had far too large a delegation. We had all sorts of people on it. Joe Sisco [Joseph J. Sisco] was the executive -- I'm not sure what they call it -- coordinator, I guess, of the delegation. But Joe, in good

sense, saw that this thing was going to be a mess, so he came back when the secretary did. But Harriman asked Luke Battle [Lucius D. Battle], who was then the executive secretary of the department, to get someone who could replace Joe and help him coordinate this ungainly mission. And that's when I got nominated for it and went on over.

O'BRIEN: Is this the first time you meet Harriman?

SULLIVAN: No, I'd met him, I think, a couple of times. But the first time I really have any recollections of having any concrete dealings with him…. And the first thing he asked me to do was look over the delegation and decide how it can be cut, what people can go and what people do we need to stay. So he gave me a couple of days to do that, and I came in with a list cutting it by one-third, which I thought was a pretty adventurous slice. And he looked at it and said, "That's not enough; I want it cut by half." So I went back and gave him a list that cut it in half. And this was the beginning of a long friendship.

O'BRIEN: Well, let me turn this.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

O'BRIEN: What does this do, though? Does it ruffle any feathers at all with people like Sisco?

SULLIVAN: Well, Sisco was already home back here. Well, it ruffled a few feathers, but frankly, the delegation was just overwhelmingly overloaded with people. Many of them, by that time who had been there three or four weeks with no signs of progress were quite willing, I think, to find this as a reasonable excuse to get up and go home. It did ruffle some feathers. For instance, the Defense Department group that they had over there was cut very sharply, and I think that caused them some pain, but not too badly. And I guess there may have been some other feathers ruffled, but that's a long time back. I don't recall them all.

O'BRIEN: Well, Harriman wanted to talk, as I understand, to Chen Yi, and the department had some reservations about that. Can you recall that?

SULLIVAN: I recall the incident, but I don't recall the details of it. I can't remember what it was he wanted to talk to Chen Yi about, or whether he wanted to talk to him privately. In any event, I recall he was not permitted to do that.

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O'BRIEN: At this point, at least in my reading of it -- well, is it fair to assume that the feeling on the part of the people at Geneva, yourself and Harriman, do you feel that the Russians have control over the Pathet Lao and can in some way or another control them, and is this a popular assumption at that point?

SULLIVAN: I think we started out with the presumption that the Soviets did have control over the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. And indeed, the Soviets themselves, I think, started with that presumption. And that was a continuing strain of beliefs throughout the entire conference. It wasn't until toward the end of the conference, when we began, literally, to see friction between the Soviets and the Chinese, that we realized that the Soviets didn't have full control over the people on their side.

Now, that began to become apparent to some of us there at the delegation much sooner than it became apparent to people here in Washington. And when we talked in terms of -- of, I remember several times when I was in charge of the delegation seeing some of his quite clearly and reporting it to Washington and then even tailoring some of my comments and some of the things that I said in the delegation in such a way to try to exploit some of this friction. There was still a very strong conviction back here among the so-called experts that the Sino-Soviet Bloc was a monolith and that this was foolish and that we were being entrapped into something and that I just didn't understand the situation at that time. But for those of us there on the spot, it was clarion clear that this is what was happening. But this did

put some jeopardy in our basic premise, that the Soviets were able to control and to monitor the agreements after the agreements had been made.

O'BRIEN: Where do you find the hard core of that attitude of the monolith?

SULLIVAN: Well, I recall coming back here one time after I'd made some statement, and Averell was back and told me he'd had to kill a message that was going to go out and reprimand me on this. But somebody had managed to leak the business to the *New York Times*, anyway. The only one I recall is a fellow named Mose Harvey, who I think was the Soviet specialist on the Policy Planning Board at that time. The prime specialists like Chip Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen] and whatnot didn't seem to be tied up by that sort of thing. But some of the middle grade people…. But it wasn't anything that Secretary Rusk held or any of the White House people. It was middle grade people.

O'BRIEN: Well, the Russians seemed to have a lot of interest in Southeast Asia and Laos at that point. Do you ever get

any insight into why? What accounted for that interest?

SULLIVAN: I think part of it was residual from their status as co-chairman of the 1953-54 conference. Part of it I think was just the sort of flamboyance of Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev]. As you may recall, the aircraft that were introduced into Laos in the airlift in 1961 were the aircraft that had been run out of Katanga when Lumumba [Patrice Lumumba] was killed. And Khrushchev just had a bunch of extra aircraft that he didn't quite know what to do with, he had them floating around, so he threw them into Laos, just literally a target of opportunity. So part of their influence was that they were the people who ran the airlift and provided the equipment that made the Pathet Lao possible. But their influence certainly came from some pretty concrete presence that they had in Laos at that time. But I would say that the institutional ones stemmed from their status as co-chairman with the British in 1953-54.

O'BRIEN: Do you get any indications that this interest at this point might be related to the developing conflict with China?

SULLIVAN: Yes. I think there's no question that the Soviets were attempting to keep their status with the North Vietnamese party and the North Vietnamese state the primordial one. They knew that the North Vietnamese feared the Chinese as a nation and ethnically. And they were engaged, of course, in the great business, at that time, of attempting to curry support amongst the communist parties of Asia which was the time that the Chinese were trying to split the party organization. You remember, it was papered over at the Congress in 1960. But the Soviets were out busily trying to be sure that

they had support from the Communist parties of North Korea and North Vietnam, Indonesia, and Japan. And of course, eventually, they lost all four of these in the later Khrushchev period. But this sort of trying to get it on the cheap was the way that Khrushchev went about it. I think that putting in those aircraft and providing that equipment was very much involved with the business of retaining preeminence in the North Vietnamese party and having the North Vietnamese vote with them in the International.

O'BRIEN: I understand, now, you and Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] go to Laos and also to Thailand in an attempt to, as I understand, to get Phoumi and Souvanna Phouma together in a kind of coalition government. How did this come about?

SULLIVAN: Let's see if I can recall this now. We had hit pretty much of a stalemate, I guess, in the negotiations in Geneva in the winter of '61-'62. I came back to Washington

around February, -- January or February. I don't recall the genesis of it, but the President and Averell Harriman decided that we ought to send someone out to see if we could prevent things from drifting apart entirely in Laos and see if we could do anything to bring them together. So Mike and I flew out -- oh, also because Win Brown, our ambassador, was sick. That's right, he'd hurt his back. And there was not only a concern about the Lao, but also about the direction of our mission out there. So we went out to have a look at the situation on the ground and give our views about how things were going. And I don't recall all the details of that, but Averell came out after we'd been there a week or two. He was having a chief of missions meeting somewhere around in the Philippines or something of that sort. Brown was in the hospital in Bangkok, and Harriman asked me to sort of de facto assume charge of the mission there. The fellow that was in charge was very gracious about this, more or less let me do it.

But in the course of that, he asked my recommendations on retaining various people or getting rid of various people. I suggested without any detriment to the individual that we get rid of the CIA man who had been the link with Phoumi because his job was to keep Phoumi fat and alive and happy, and I thought that if we removed him that Phoumi might get the message that it wasn't going to be all sweetness in life. So we did remove him, and I think Phoumi did get the message. At the same time, I was asked to go up and talk with Souvanna who was up on the other side of the lines up there with Souphanouvong, the communist, and the North Vietnamese. Surprisingly, the North Vietnamese let me in, and I stayed up there a couple of days.

But our business of attempting to get a coalition government worked out was getting nowhere. So I think I sent a message to Harriman as he was en route from Manilla to Tokyo, saying that although I had the ingredients of a coalition government pretty well in hand, I didn't have the clout to make sure it would actually work. And I thought that if it was going to work that he should come back and stop over and drop in for a day or two. So he did, and

he did clout them. We got the Thai Prime Minister, Sarit [Sarit Thanarat] to come up to Udorn -- no, it wasn't Udorn, it was a town opposite Vientiane, I should know it. Nongkhai. And we brought Phoumi over there, and the Thais pretty much put their stamp on having a coalition. The net result was that within a matter of a couple of weeks they did work out a coalition. Phoumi did agree to accept the ministry of finance rather than the ministry of defense, and that was, I think, the thing that more or less broke the impasse.

O'BRIEN: Harriman was pretty hard on Phoumi in that meeting, wasn't he?

SULLIVAN: He was pretty hard on Phoumi and pretty hard on several others and shook his fingers at them in a way that they objected to, but some of them can look back on now and laugh.

O'BRIEN: You don't happen to recall -- there has been some debate, actually, I think in some of the writings that have taken place, as to just what Harriman said to Phoumi. You don't happen to recall, do you?

SULLIVAN: I could identify it if you could quote it to me, but I can't remember what the exact phrase was. It was something about…

O'BRIEN: Something to the effect that you're taking your nation down the road to…

SULLIVAN: You've ruined your own…. You're destroying your state, and you'll destroy yourselves with it or something of that sort that I recall. The principal thing was that he shook his finger at each one of these guys that were lined up at this table.

O'BRIEN: Was this a…

SULLIVAN: Mike Forrestal, I think, doing the translating into French. Averell was…

O'BRIEN: Well, Harriman has a reputation of being a very, very patient man. Was this a calculated act on his part or something someone…

SULLIVAN: Well, Harriman isn't all that -- Harriman is patient strategically, but tactically, he is not. He's always blowing up, having short fuses. The trouble is that many people who don't know him well assume that this is sort of irreversible. If you know Averell well enough, you just ride with that and then laugh with him a bit later on. And he'll come around and be…. He is essentially patient, as you say, but he has this explosive thing. But this was very much calculated. This was rather clearly contrived and deliberately done. But there was a great deal of underlying resentment and

wrath and annoyance that was there that was quite genuine. But when he wants to he has excellent control over his emotions down there.

O'BRIEN: Were the Thais or anyone else offended by this?

SULLIVAN: Oh yes. The Thai were very unhappy, particularly Thanat Khoman, but that also was taken into account.

O'BRIEN: What is the relation between -- is it Khoman or is it Sarit -- and Phoumi? Is there a direct family relationship?? Sarit, isn't it?

SULLIVAN: Sarit. There was a relationship that is not real, it's in the sort of expanded Southeast Asian family. No blood relationship that I know of. He used to call Sarit his uncle, but it's not really that close.

O'BRIEN: Well, by this time you're working with Forrestal -- Forrestal, of course, is on the White House side of things. Did you get any insight into Harriman's sort of philosophy of working with both the department and the White House? I mean, just what is the channel of communication?

SULLIVAN: Well, first of all, you have to remember that Harriman's background was such that he had worked around the government quite a bit; but specifically, that he had worked in the White House and been Harry Truman's sort of chief of staff. And secondly, you have to remember that Harriman considered himself in 1952 a serious contender for the presidency; that Harry Truman supported him as his candidate for the presidency. Harriman has tremendous awe of the presidency of the United States, of the office, and aspired to it and feels that it is the office of the land. He therefore looked upon the execution of foreign policy as being the prerogative of the President. And he looked upon the State Department as something more of a service organization and not as the policy-making area. This also, I think, reflects this relationship with Roosevelt. When Roosevelt was the President, he was special emissary to several places and then, of course, the ambassador to Moscow and London.

So as far as he was concerned, the center of foreign policy decision-making was in the White House, and he kept his lines straight open to the White House and with impeccable courtesy kept associations here in the Department of State. But he didn't regard them all that highly. He regarded his functions as flowing straight from the President. And of course, having the affection of so many of the people on the White House staff, Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], Carl Kaysen, and so forth, and Mike Forrestal being pretty much an adopted member of the Harriman family, he had that sort of direct communication and a communication, of course, in due course, with the President. It hadn't been all that close in the beginning. But the President began to have great respect for his judgment and for his ability and for the contacts and knowledge that he had around the world. In other words, he

could go say things to Khrushchev that nobody else could say to Khrushchev and get away with it.

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O'BRIEN: Does this cause any friction with Secretary Rusk that you see?

SULLIVAN. Rusk is a very patient man. If you talk about patient men, Rusk really is a patient man. Although I'm sure there was some resentment, as there always would be in any human being, he never let it show, he always kept himself very much on an even keel during all this. There were some other resentments, I guess, but Harriman didn't pay much attention to them.

O'BRIEN: Is there any center of resistance to Harriman in the Department?

SULLIVAN: Not that I recall, you know, to put a finger on in my recollection of being any specific center. I think a lot of people sort of resented his free-wheeling operations, but not certainly those who worked for him. When he had the East Asia Bureau, of course, he had a good deal of support and constituency here. So the area he was working in didn't cause him any problem. Then you have to remember, realize that all the others like Chip Bohlen and Foy Kohler and all these people worked for him as junior officers when he was ambassador to Moscow. So he had a very broad constituency here even if he cut across their bows occasionally.

O'BRIEN: But you're in a rather delicate situation, being a foreign service officer and also attached to Harriman, aren't you?

SULLIVAN: No, not particularly. I don't know if I had any resentments around. I'm not particularly aware of them. No, I played pretty much within the system. And that was largely my function, to be sure that whatever he was going to do would touch base appropriately where and with people abroad so that it wasn't going to be all a can of worms afterwards. I had a fairly broad spread of acquaintance in the Department so I didn't have too much of a problem. Sometimes I found myself a bit caught in between on the seventh floor, but again, that was never really -- no real problem; no skin lost on that.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into the Pushkin [G.M. Pushkin]-Harriman relationship? They got along pretty well, didn't they?

SULLIVAN: They got along pretty well, and I got on well with Pushkin during the six or seven months that I was there when Averell wasn't. Pushkin was an impressive fellow. He is physically sort of strange because he was squat and he had one wall eye that went off at a weird angle. But he had a sense of humor, and he

had a very quick mind, and he was a damned good diplomat. He said what he had to say, and he never went beyond it to hyperbole and

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always was very well disciplined. I had two or three rather interesting encounters with him, particularly on a couple of times when he tried to push me over the brink on a couple of things and made it rather tempting to go, and I didn't go. He was amused, at least interested by it. But I found him, as Averell did, a very satisfactory counterpart to negotiate with. As far as the Soviets were concerned, he was by far the most -- I won't say the most human -- but one of the most human of their negotiators and not just an automaton.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever get any insight into some of the Russians' interests, particularly in Southeast Asia, through Pushkin?

SULLIVAN: Yes, I perhaps came to the conclusion -- and I still abide by it, and I think I derived some of it from Pushkin -- that they regarded their interest in Southeast Asia as being not dissimilar to ours and somewhat parallel to ours and that they were very much concerned about the Chinese. And it was through this that I came to the conclusion that this rift between the Soviets and Chinese was a genuine thing, because he let enough of this permeate what he said that it became quite clear it wasn't just being staged.

O'BRIEN: When do you really become concerned about closing the border, the Laotian-Vietnamese border?

SULLIVAN: Well, it became clear, of course, in '62 that the North Vietnamese were stepping up the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Therefore, this portion of Laos, which had not been the paramount concern before -- because, as I say, the paramount concern had been against Thailand -- we became more interested and involved in this. And we tried to set in the so-called corridor provisions of the agreement. We did get them in. We tried to get ICC [International Control Commission] use in that area. We got free movement and helicopters and whatnot for them.

But I would say that this concern, not only with us but also with our military, didn't really begin to generate until the basic elements of the treaty were all pretty well lined up. And we really didn't begin to get major expressions of concern from the military until after the agreement had been signed. And then I remember getting them from Admiral Felt [Harry D. Felt] when I stopped in Honolulu. But Felt's general feeling was, well, there was going to be a problem, but it was not one we couldn't live with, because there may be only a few thousand a year coming down. And there were at that time only five or six thousand a year coming down there. We didn't really get high levels of concern expressed until about '63 or '64 when it became clear that they were expanding this into a major highway.

O'BRIEN: Well, how do you and Harriman react to some of Phoumi's actions in the spring of 1962? I'm thinking particularly of the Battle of Nam Tha in which he was rather soundly beaten.

SULLIVAN: Well, I was out there just before the battle of Nam Tha, and our own military officers were pulling out their hair because they thought this was a foolish concentration of forces. They felt that this position of forces halfway down the hill with the enemy above them was ridiculous. They felt the whole thing was very poorly deployed. And they briefed me on all this. I talked to Phoumi about it, and he poohed-poohed it. I began to be suspicious that he might be attempting to entrap us in a debacle which would require us to come in. And my general reaction was one of great caution and not getting ourselves snookered on this one. And when the place actually fell -- I can't remember the dates of that….

O'BRIEN: It was around May 10, I think.

SULLIVAN: I remember I was back here at the time, and I remember sending the General, General Tucker [Reuben Tucker], a message and asked him to find out what the hell the situation actually was: Had the North Vietnamese really gone all the way to the Thai border, which is what Phoumi and his people were alleging. And the little general went up there, got in a jeep, and drove up the road almost all the way to Nam Tha and came back and said nope, he couldn't find any North Vietnamese anywhere. I had intended really that…. He went off, I think, with four people. So we were able at that point to advise the President. As I remember, he was very much concerned. We didn't think they were going to follow up and exploit this thing, and with a little bit of kicking in the tail, we'd get some Lao back up there again and it wouldn't be a trip to Thailand.

I remember Tucker sent back a message saying that the general in command "couldn't lead a squad around the corner," and that apparently made a considerable impression on President Kennedy's mind. I remember several months later, when the Chinese attacked India, we were trying to get a military mission together, and we were going to get a general officer. We didn't want too high a ranking one, but a ranking officer to go out as the head of the new military assistance mission in India. And I remember President Kennedy turning to me and saying, "Remember that little general. That's the kind we want. The one who said the guy couldn't lead his squad around the corner. Let's see if we can't get him." But he'd been retired by then with a bad heart, I guess. That incident with Ruben Tucker -- he took his message very seriously, found sort of a hasty method to find out what the situation was, personally drove up the trail.

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O'BRIEN: Well, when the decision is made to put the troops in Thailand and move the fleet, is Harriman pretty much in agreement with this?

SULLIVAN: Well, yes, basically. There was a lot of tugging and hauling. Roger Hilsman was over here at that time, the assistant secretary, I guess. And the joint chiefs were happy with this decision and went charging ahead sending the troops down and so forth. I remember…. I don't think Averell got too upset about it, but Roger got quite concerned. And I remember his calling -- he called Mac Bundy, I guess, and said you've got to reverse this. And then he called General Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer], I think it was, got him out of a dinner party, I recall, and said, in effect, "Stop the fleet." And Lemnitzer, I guess, got a hold of somebody else.

I remember President Kennedy called up, and we were all here, Harriman and Hilsman and Mike Forrestal and Chuck Cross [Charles T. Cross] and myself. I remember answering the phone, and it was the President. He said, "What the hell is going on over there?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Do you know that Roger Hilsman has just stopped the fleet in the middle of…." [Laughter] Well, I didn't know that. I knew he had talked with General Lemnitzer. He said, "Let me talk to Hilsman." And he put the fleet back on track again. I remember Averell at that time was in favor of deployment forces. We did have a few insubordinate men, too.

O'BRIEN: What kind of an assistant secretary did Hilsman make?

SULLIVAN: Oh, Roger was a…. He is a bright fellow who has not had a background of experience in diplomacy or in administration of the Department of State. He'd come in as a research man from the Library of Congress, not the [National] Archives. And then he did the research for the department. He did extremely well in research. He got something that had been a very lethargic organization brought up to the point where it could provide research and intelligence on a timely real-time basis. He nominated himself for the job as assistant secretary.

Averell had asked me who my nominee for assistant secretary was, and it was Bill Bundy. He said that was his nominee too. So then when we tried to get Bundy and Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] was so keen on keeping him that he promoted him. He made Paul Nitze secretary of Navy, I guess, and made Bill the assistant secretary. So Bill out of loyalty to Bob and whatnot stayed on.

But Roger rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. He's bright and

quick and a little too convinced of his own infallibility. So he ran across a lot of lines, and ruffled an awful lot of feathers, particularly in the military. And although I'm personally very fond of him, I think that he just didn't fit into the pattern and it didn't work very well.

O'BRIEN: I haven't really asked you about your impressions of Phoumi and Souvanna Phouma either?

SULLIVAN: When I first met Phoumi…. Believe it or not, I didn't meet him at the

time, but when I was a youngster in Bangkok in 1947. When I first went out there, we lived in a house that was across the street from what were then known as the Lao exiles, which was Prince Petsarath, Souvanna's older brother, and Souvanna himself. And the chief of the bodyguard, who was always out doing boxing, used to walk with the prince along the road in front of our house. Everyday I'd see him, and there was always a bodyguard with him. That was Phoumi. He was a trim, but vigorous officer. I don't know whether I met him in Geneva or Paris or in Zurich. I don't recall. I may have.

But my first real recollection of him was when Mike Forrestal and I went out there. Phoumi was down on an island near Savannakhet. We went down, went to a barbecue with him down there, a drinking party afterwards. Phoumi was obviously being his most gracious and obsequious and whatnot. My impression of him was that he was a very shrewd character. He had sort of squinty, little pig eyes. He always had problems with his eyes; they were always running. And he always had a great, big, affable smile on his face. My basic impression of him was that I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. I think, you know, having then seen him over the years and seen him in all sorts of moods, in moods of despondency in moods of determination and so forth, that he's an interesting character.

He's a person of no great origins by oriental standards, but a shrew person; a person who had worked his way into a position by being quicker mentally than others, by being physically tougher, by having a certain amount of courage, but also by being properly obsequious with the right people at the right time, and then moving fast on the doublecross whenever that benefited. He was a person who was a seeker after power and who was ruthless in the way he went after it. But he was not an unintelligent man and not a total toady. He did have some strength and some charisma.

Souvanna, on the other hand, is a totally different person. Souvanna is the descendant of the cadet branch of the royal family, and that branch of the family…. I don't know if you know the

Laos and the Thai royal systems. The first kind in Thailand, of course, is the king who concerns himself more with the important things in life, which are the religious functions and the Buddhist Saugkha and making sure that the royal elephants are in good form and so forth and so on. The second king is the fellow who, in effect, is the prime minister, who does the dirty jobs like running the government.

Well, Souvanna's father and grandfather and great grandfather before him had that function; and he just considered himself the hereditary prime minister. He was the fellow that should take on this function of viceroy, felt his elder brother Phetsarath had inherited it. So the first impression you get of Souvanna is one of the sort of a dandified, country gentlemen, French gentlemen, always properly, impeccably dressed, rather autocratic, rather sure of himself, and a bit stuffy, but with a long head. But when you start to get to know him, you discover that he's a man who had a considerable amount of not just personal charm, but human interest in himself, in his family, in others. He can be autocratic, and he can say, "Off with their heads," without batting an eyelash and let it go through. But he is essentially a patriot. He has a sense of humor. I found him, of course, to be, in the years that I worked with

him subsequently, a man of considerable character. He also was surprisingly well-read in certain fields, but had surprising lacunae. He just never has really become a modern, governmental administrator because there were just certain things like finance and economics that he not only doesn't understand but has no desire or intention -- ever wants to learn.

O'BRIEN: Well, in the spring of '63 -- I went out in '62 in the fall, and it seemed to be pretty well rocking along. And then, of course, there were the attacks on Kong Le. And by the spring of '63 it was quite clear that the Pathet Lao were not living up to the agreements, that the North Vietnamese stayed in the country, that the Russians didn't have control of the situation. But that time Pushkin had died, and our efforts to get the Russians on track were not succeeding. I had gone over to London and Paris…. I'm trying to think when that was. It was in the winter of '62. That was more or less on trying to get economic assistance, I remember. But I guess it was spring of '63 that Averell Harriman suggested to the President that he ought go over and talk to Khrushchev about this. He and Mike Forrestal and I went over in about April, I think, of '63.

O'BRIEN: Were you in on the meetings with Khrushchev?

SULLIVAN: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Do you happen to recall any of those meetings in that briefing?

SULLIVAN: Not much got agreed to. We had the long meeting, about three hours, two and a half hours, I guess, with Gromyko [Andrei A. Gromyko]. We got the usual stonewall from Gromyko, but Harriman expected that. We went through this business of the ritual thing, and we went through our ritual. That didn't get us much of anywhere. But the next day we had a meeting with Khrushchev. Gromyko was also present and Smirnovsky [Mikhail N. Smirnovsky], I guess, who is now the Soviet ambassador in London, who used to be here as minister and whom I've known for years, and who was then head of the American department in the Soviet Foreign Office, and somebody else. I can't remember who it was now, the other -- Lapin [Sergei G. Lapin], I guess -- and Victor Sukhadev, the translator. And we had Harriman and Fay Kohler and Mike Forrestal and myself.

We met about three hours in the Kremlin, a late spring evening, I remember. It was fascinating because Khrushchev obviously didn't want to be pinned down on anything. And he'd jog off in all directions. He'd pick up some rocks that they'd just gotten out of somewhere in Siberia and say that the gold content of this was such. And he was obviously under attack at that time from his own people on economic program because he kept being very defensive about how good the Soviet economy was, and we weren't asking him about that. Then we went around on Cuba because they still had some troops in Cuba. And he talked about Berlin. He said that he regarded Berlin as a bunion on our toes, and that anytime

he had any trouble with us, he would just step on our toe and twist his heel like that and then take off his hat and say, “Thank you very much.”

And finally -- Harriman really kept boring in on him on Southeast Asia -- Khrushchev finally threw up his hands, and he said, “Laos, Vietnam, all Southeast Asia, you and the Chinese can fight over it. I give up. We give up. We don’t want any of it.” And I think this was pretty much the situation that he got himself boxed into by that time. The North Vietnamese had pretty well cut the Russians off, you know. They’d gone over to the Chinese side. And, oh, policy and all the gambles that he took in Southeast Asia were beginning to sour. I think he was having his own problem with the party hierarchy and the central committee, and he had his economic problem. But it was a fascinating insight into Khrushchev as a human being and the way he operated.

O’BRIEN: Is this the meeting where he offered Harriman a job?

SULLIVAN: Yes, to be his economic advisor. And then at the end of the meeting it was amusing. Harriman did, as usual, a little bit of one-upmanship, saying, you know, “When Stalin had this office I think he had this picture over here. Marx was over the door.”

But at the end of the meeting -- it was, as I say, fairly late in the evening. And of course, the sun goes down early in Moscow. He had a mottled sort of Persian rug on the floor. And as we finished, Gromyko and Foy Kohler decided we’d better have a little communique that we agreed upon, a little statement of what we could say to the press. So Foy and Mike and Gromyko and Smirnovsky or somebody were working on this little communique. And Harriman and Khrushchev and Victor Sukhadev and I were standing more or less in front of Khrushchev’s desk. And Harriman had a set of keys, a key ring that he had with keys on it for his briefcase. He was fiddling around with it, and one of the keys dropped out, one of the little keys. And I looked for it. Victor looked for it. We couldn’t find it. Finally Khrushchev said, “Oh it’s down there somewhere.” So he got down on his hands and knees looking for it. And I got down on my hands and knees. I went under Khrushchev’s desk because I thought it might be there. ANd the next thing I knew he was under there with me. And Kohler and Gromyko and Forrestal…

[BEGIN SIDE I, TAPE II]

…and saying to Harriman, “Have you looked in the cuff of your trousers?” And, “Oh, of course, I’ve looked there. It’s not there, not there.” So we finally gave up and couldn’t find the key. And Khrushchev was giggling with delight that he had the key to Harriman’s briefcase and that he had all Harriman’s millions and so forth. And we left. And as we were leaving, going out the gates of the Kremlin, I said to Harriman, “Now, did you really look in the cuffs of your trousers?” He said, “Of course I did.” He looked down there, and he found the damn key. He had Khrushchev crawling around on the floor for it.

But it was a total failure as far as getting the Soviets to do anything. As I say, the only thing to me was it was a very interesting insight into the character of Khrushchev. He was quite an individual.

O'BRIEN: To this point, though, the United States has pretty much lived within the framework of the Geneva agreement, as I understand.

SULLIVAN: Oh, yes. We were stuck at that time with the request from Kong Le for military assistance. He, of course, had all

Soviet type weapons; and they turned to the Soviets -- Souvanna asked, and the Soviets had refused. Then they turned to us for assistance. And before making up our minds on that -- this was when we went over to Moscow -- we saw that the Soviets weren't going to do anything. We then provided military equipment for Kong Le. But it was still being provided within the framework of the Geneva agreement.

O'BRIEN: Well, shortly after that the decision comes up as to whether or not to go beyond the Geneva agreements in terms of overt and covert aid. Does this take place during the Kennedy administration?

SULLIVAN: Yes, in so far as giving certain assistance to the Meo tribes people through the agency of the CIA; we did that during the Kennedy administration. Some of our lawyers would contend that that too was within the framework of the Geneva agreement; and I think we could make a very good case that it was. Of course, essentially, the case was that the other side had broken the agreement; and since in international law there is a provision for reciprocity in reaction to it…. But we did our best to stay within the letter of the agreements in all these arrangements that we made.

O'BRIEN: Well, during the time previous to that some of the interdiction, as I understand, that was taking place from the Vietnam side had been toned down. Well, as I understand it, from the Vietnamese side…

SULLIVAN: Talking about South Vietnam?

O'BRIEN: Right. There were certain operations which attempted to interdict the supply lines in Laos.

SULLIVAN: No. We weren't running anything in Laos in this area.

O'BRIEN: Is there anything other, beyond the Meo tribesmen? Is there anything else that was done in the way of -- things outside the Geneva agreement?

SULLIVAN: The operations of Air America which were -- again, we made every effort to make sure they were not violating the agreements. Although they were flying the planes, they were not flying military equipment. The military equipment was being flown in planes that we had provided, but flown by Lao pilots. So we made a hell of an effort all through ‘63 and most of ‘64 to try to keep within the bounds of the agreements. But the North Vietnamese

just kept pushing.

O’BRIEN: How does Unger [Leonard Unger] work out as ambassador?

SULLIVAN: Very good. He spoke Thai and therefore could get out in Laos with a great many people. He had some French. He furbished it and got in pretty good shape in French. He has a gentle sort of quiet personality that appealed to the Laos. I think he was basically very “sympatico.” And I think that he did a very good job.

O’BRIEN: Well, just one final series of question on this. As I understand, Harriman was quite concerned about some of the commitments that we had made, particularly in regard to the Geneva agreements with some of the commitments that we had made to the Thais. Did you get any insight into that? I was thinking mainly of perhaps some reservations about the Rusk-Thanat [Thanat Khoman] agreement.

SULLIVAN: Well, Harriman has been basically of the opinion that the Thai and the countries of Southeast Asia are going to have to work out some of the neutralization and some sort of modus vivendi with the Chinese; and that we shouldn’t push any of these nations to the point that they put themselves in jeopardy with the Chinese; he also felt that we shouldn’t let any of them lead us around by the nose to the point where they took positions and postures that led us into some risk. I think he felt that the Thai were a little bit hard-nosed and that by giving them carte blanche, as he thought the Rusk-Thanat agreement did, that they might get us to a point of involving us beyond our interest. He always used to say, “We mustn’t become slaves to our satellites.” And he was concerned, I think, on that score. I’m not sure. I can’t remember when the Rusk-Thanat agreements were signed. Were they signed in…

O’BRIEN: ‘62. Eight years. September ‘62.

SULLIVAN: Were they?

O’BRIEN: I may be wrong. I’m not sure.

SULLIVAN: I’ll have to confess that I don’t have any sharp recollections on that,

particularly.

O’BRIEN: Well, I think this might be a good place to stop.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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