

**Kenneth T. Young Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/25/1969**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Kenneth T. Young  
**Interviewer:** Dennis O'Brien  
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**Biographical Note**

Young worked in the State Department on the Philippines-Southeast Asian desk during the Dwight D. Eisenhower Administration and he was the United States Ambassador to Thailand from 1961 through 1963. In this interview Young discusses issues with American policy in Southeast Asia and the need for more informed decision makers; the process of his appointment as Ambassador to Thailand; Thai distrust over French actions in SEATO [South East Asia Treaty Organization] and inaction in Laos; and the various debates over U.S. actions in Laos and Thailand in the early 1960s, among other issues.

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Archivist of the United States

Date: 7-18-02

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Oral History Interview

With

KENNETH T. YOUNG

February 25, 1969  
New York, New York

By Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: I think the obvious place to begin is did you know John Fitzgerald Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] before he became President?

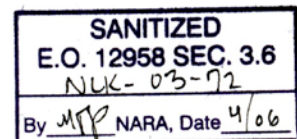
YOUNG: I knew him slightly before he became President. I saw him several times when he was a Senator. When I came back from one or two trips to Southeast Asia I went up on the Hill and had lunch with him and sort of talked to him about it; briefed him, gave him my impressions. But I did not have any continuous meetings with him or wasn't involved to much of an extent really.

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O'BRIEN: Did he have much contact with what has sometimes been referred to as a rather informal group called the China group or the Far East group while he was in the Senate and campaigning?

YOUNG: I don't understand that designation of the China group or the Far East group.

O'BRIEN: Well, I was thinking of what Fairbank [John K. Fairbank] suggests in the



little thing he wrote on the U.S. and China. He refers to a group of people who were people who in some way or another dealt with the Far East and had informal contacts with each other and continued these—this, of course, going back to World War II.

YOUNG: You mean academics more or less.

O'BRIEN: Well, academics and business both. There, for example, an informal group that meets at DACOR [Diplomatic and Consular Officials Retired] House in Washington.

YOUNG: Oh, yes. Yes, I know that group. I've been there several times. Now, I couldn't answer the question as to whether he had any contacts with this group or not.

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O'BRIEN: Do you know anything about the sociology of that group as far as their makeup and...

YOUNG: Well, the Far East luncheon group in Washington is made up or was made up—I think they're still meeting—of men who had served in China mainly, but also some in Japan; retired diplomats, consul generals and some businessmen, as I recall. In the fifties, now, and before 1961 I went to two or three of their lunches up on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. I've forgotten which one of the hotels they met in. The Lafayette or somewhere up there. They would usually have a speaker of somebody in the group or somebody who had just returned. And it was small, around a table, more or less, you know, fifteen or sixteen. I came and spoke once, fifteen, twenty minutes. And then they would ask questions. There were several elderly men in the group whose names I remembered. But as far as I recall, it was just that, a social group that met either once a month or once

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every other month. I don't recall ever in the State Department having any policy influence. It didn't come into the State Department and say, "We think you should do this or not do that," as far as I know. It was just a kind of get-together. Those men who had served in the same area and wanted to keep in touch with each other. Old China hands kind of thing.

O'BRIEN: Were there any of the people in the Kennedy inner circle that contacted these people for advice before and during the campaign?

YOUNG: Not that I know of, in the Washington area. They might have done it outside the various academics, particularly at Harvard.



O'BRIEN: You were in the State Department in the fifties. Did you have any differences with the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration, particularly when you were on the Philippines-Southeast Asian desk?

YOUNG: Yes and no. I had a lot of agreements and a lot

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of disagreements. I suppose it reflects the, you know, not so much the generation gap as the Housing gap. [Laughter] The lower down you are in the hierarchy and the lower floor you're on in the building, the farther away you get from the point of decision in, I think, any administration.

I think one of my criticisms of the American government in foreign policy is that the deciders of action—whether it's a quarter of three, "How do we answer this telegram?" or "What do we say in this communiqué?" or "What do we tell the Prime Minister?"—that very often the four or five men who gather to make that decision are not really specialists in the area, have very little background on it, and sometimes they don't call in the men who know when they should, even when it's a matter of minutes, but especially if it's a matter of two or three days and so forth. And so my differences

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of opinion, I think, in the Eisenhower Administration, and also in the Kennedy Administration, were more ones of operations but occasionally over a real policy difference that we should do this or we shouldn't do that and then the style in dealing with Asians. I think this was my principal difficulty with the top floor. You know, the seventh floor problem and the White House.

And this, I think, goes back to something more fundamental which I'll just mention because you may want to come back into it, which is that in Asia policy the policy-makers are men who know where Rome is, they haven't the foggiest idea what Bangkok's like, and they've probably only been to Tokyo once, maybe Hong Kong to get silk for their wife, if they've ever been across the Pacific. And since 1945 my experience in the U.S. government is that the top men who are able, dedicated, patriotic—whether civilian and military—are Asia blind. So they have

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no concept of how the Japanese are going to react or the Thais or the Indians or the Filipinos, and that sort of thing. They just don't take that into consideration. Whereas if they're dealing with a French problem or British or NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] or even Soviet, while we've certainly not covered ourselves with hundred per cent grades and marks in our European affairs, I gather, you have some sense of—you don't say this today in public, anyway, when France is involved. But it's amazing how many times in the, at least in the East Asian picture we goof just because of ignorance. And I think that was my main reaction in the Eisenhower picture.

I also felt that in the Eisenhower Administration that there was a poor understanding and a brittle treatment of the gray area between the enemy who's all one color and the friend who's all another color, you know, between bright green

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and bright red. Something like that. And that this issue of non-alignment and neutrality, the Asian feeling of not being forced to take a stand specifically here and now, was not understood by the Eisenhower Administration and by a lot of Americans, and it still isn't completely, but it's much better today. But this was a mistake. I felt that we were beginning to get too much into military assistance rather than basic fundamental structure of nation building and political development and leadership, young leadership. We dealt too much in terms of money. You know: big problems, big packages. And I think we're all involved in that.

I think we began to sense in the Eisenhower Administration that we were trying to do too much in too many places. We were everywhere, everywhere, you know. And I admit this. This is part of self-criticism. My main concern was in Southeast Asia, of course, in '55 to '58, and I think we didn't go far enough with a reform program. So that what I'm saying is

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a conservative, perhaps business oriented Administration was not capable through its conceptions, as well as its contacts with people, to really push a land reform program in Vietnam in '55-'56 and put the money up for it. And we had a lot of arguments to force through even a little bit of funds for technical assistance to support land reform in South Vietnam to help the 80 per cent of the rural people under Ngo Dinh Diem. But this was kind of like pulling teeth, you know, or rolling molasses up the hill in wintertime with a particular group in Congress as well as within the Administration at that time. So my criticisms were partly ideological and partly operational.

O'BRIEN: Well, as long as we're attacking that particular problem, with the Kennedy Administration, if you ever read people like George Ball [George W. Ball] correctly and their criticism of foreign policy, they feel that we in the Kennedy years began to put much too

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much emphasis on developing nations, particularly Southeast Asian nations, and we saw them as much too important within the framework of American foreign policy. Do you see this as a fundamental split within the minds of policy makers in the Department throughout the Kennedy years? Do you see that, in the sense that...

YOUNG: You mean putting too much emphasis on development?

O'BRIEN: Right, and also on change.

YOUNG: On the decade of development and then on Southeast Asia? My recollection is not one of over-emphasis on Southeast Asia, but rather perhaps too little emphasis. After all, I was out there on the receiving end. And you always feel you're at the short end of the stick when you're at the end of the cable traffic, even though we didn't have telephone communications when I was in Bangkok. I thought that the Alliance for Progress, the interdependence theme with Europe, the détente with the Soviet Union, all of these

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efforts by President Kennedy, that Yale speech in June, I guess it was, in 1963, the efforts to try to break through this wall with the Chinese Communists: as I recollect on this it seemed to me to indicate that he had a, you know, somewhat balanced, if you will, interest. That is, he was interested in South America and the Alliance for Progress and that—whether it was good or bad or oversold or undersold is not my point at the moment. What I'm saying is that I had the strong feeling in the Kennedy Administration, in fact it was kind of by way of inspiration that it was not all things to all men, but it had major priorities in some relationship and it was trying to meet problems around the world. Not in every country at once, but in Europe, in Latin America, and, I guess, in Africa, too, although that didn't come through so clearly out in Asia. But in Africa, too.

O'BRIEN: Well, you were there...

YOUNG: You see, I was there '61 through most of '63, and

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this is before the major effort in Vietnam. That's another point that...

O'BRIEN: Right. When you were with Stan-Vac [Standard Vacuum Oil Company] did you have anything to do with Thailand?

YOUNG: I went out there on two trips. I was interested in working on a petro-chemical development in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, that integrated regional cooperation of petro-chemical plants in various countries, sized to regional market. And it was, as I look back upon it, it was totally visionary and just kind of fascinated me because I didn't know anything about petro-chemicals. I had to learn as I went by listening to these chemists and these oil men who talked about petro-chemicals and what refineries do. I spent a couple of weeks down in the Indonesia refinery climbing all over the place trying to find out what these stacks did and what these things did. I sort of took a short Berlitz course in the petro-chemical language of how you take this black stuff and turn it into all

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these fancy products and why this is changing (the technology), why it's good. You know, fertilizer and insecticides, and this will mean more food, and all kinds of things like that. And also it's good business for an American company like Standard Oil of New Jersey.

The other thing that impressed me, and still does, is that this kind of development in most of the world outside of the Soviet is done through the private mechanism and that the combination of private resources—brainpower and arrangements kind of thing—is on the whole pretty efficient, provided it accepts the rules of the game in the country in which it wants to work. One of the difficulties of foreign enterprise in all these countries has been the slowness of accepting the change in the rules of the game. Business companies in some cases have not adjusted to the post-colonial

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period. A lot of the men who lived in the colonial period and high on the hog, you know, just couldn't accept the idea that this young man who is now the Minister of Mines is telling them that they can do this and they can't do that. But that's getting off the subject.

O'BRIEN: Well, not really. Perhaps we can come back to that later. Did you have any contact with the task forces that operated in the interim period between the election and the Inauguration on various problems of foreign policy?

YOUNG: None.

O'BRIEN: Getting to your appointment, do you know why you were appointed or where the appointment came from of yours to the position of Ambassador to Thailand?

YOUNG: Not entirely. The way it was explained to me was that my name was on several lists.

O'BRIEN: Were these the so-called Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] talent lists?

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YOUNG: Yes, Bowles and Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] lists. And two or three of the people in that group got in touch with me after the election and asked if I'd come down and join the New Frontier, without specifying what they had known. And I said no, I didn't think so. I thought I'd stick it out in private industry for awhile longer. But then the more I thought of it the more I sort of began to.... So when the second time came around—I guess it was in January either before or after the Inauguration, or I guess it was during the Inauguration down in Washington that I sort of relented with a couple of these friends. But whether that was connected with the State Department and the Bowles thing, I don't know. I never checked up on it.

O'BRIEN: Well, who made the contacts with you?

YOUNG: Well, George McGhee called me on the phone one night and said could I come down to Washington very

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quickly. And I said, "Well, I can come down in the next two or three days, whenever you say." He said, "Well, could you come down next Tuesday morning? Chester Bowles would like to see you." And I said, "Oh, what about?" He said, "Well, he'll tell you." I said, "Just tell me the time." He checked with somebody and said, "Could you make it eleven o'clock," or something, "on Tuesday?" I think. So I saw Chester Bowles at I think it was eleven o'clock.

O'BRIEN: Do you know if there was any opposition at all to your appointment as Ambassador, either within Congress or within the Administration?

YOUNG: Not that I know of, but I assume there was.

O'BRIEN: Any reasons for assuming that?

YOUNG: Oh, just in general. Everybody has an enemy somewhere, you know. There must have been at least one other man who wanted that job or one other man who had somebody who he wanted in that job as Ambassador to Bangkok. Now, I don't know whether there was any or.... There may have been some

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feeling in the Foreign Service that I had left the State Department and therefore why should I get a big plum like this? There was a lot of, I think, increasing feeling of hostility between the new people brought in at that time and the Foreign Service, in Washington, that is, the Foreign Service people in the State Department. There was almost an explicit expression of hostility and lack of confidence regarding the Foreign Service on the part of the Kennedy Administration, so to speak, in a general way. And this was reflected in turn. Now, I heard all about this when I came down, and I asked a few of my friends in the Foreign Service about this, whether I should accept this or not, because I was somewhat concerned about a non-Foreign Service person becoming an ambassador. Not in a political sense because I was not a political appointee. I made this very clear when we talked about it, and it was made very

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clear to me that this was based on specialization, I guess you'd call it.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any alternatives here in the way of choices of positions, other countries, or perhaps something within the Department?

YOUNG: You mean was I given a list to choose...

O'BRIEN: Yes. Did you choose Thailand or...

YOUNG: No, it was presented to me.

O'BRIEN: It was presented to you in that way. Well, passing over to some of the problems of Thailand and Southeast Asia, can you briefly describe some of the problems that you stepped into when you took over, in a sense, as Ambassador to Thailand?

YOUNG: Well, that's telling me to get my spade out and dig into the old memory recesses. '61? Well, I went out with Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] in May of 1961 on his trip to Asia which I had strongly recommended about four weeks before to Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and Jim Rowe [James H. Rowe, Jr.]. And I think this is how the Johnson visit to

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Southeast Asia got started, one day in the White House in the breakfast room there downstairs. I did it on the grounds that there was a crisis of confidence in many of these countries because of what had happened and not happened in 1959 and '60 into '61, and particularly in Southeast Asia. The Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and so forth. It seemed to me that the Vice President had made quite an impact in Africa on his trip, and I couldn't think of anybody else who was high enough up who could sort of get out there and look around, come back and make some reports. I did not know the Vice President. I had never met him. I'd seen him a couple of times on the Hill, you know, sitting back row at some hearing where Senator Johnson came in. Anyway, off we went for this great safari.

When we arrived in Bangkok it had been about six weeks, I think, since there had been an Ambassador in Bangkok. That was

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Alex Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson]. He had been brought back to Washington by Dean Rusk. So I was very much importuned by people in the Embassy not to continue on with the Vice President, but to stay there and assume charge of the Embassy, as they say, even though I couldn't present my credentials for another few weeks because the King was out of Bangkok, until he returned in mid-June which was, oh, a month later. And because of this fact I had felt that it would be better to wait until he returned because an ambassador is not effective until he's presented his credentials. You can sit in your Embassy and give orders and write cables back to Washington, you know, within the American community. But you have no standing with the government to which you are credited or with the other diplomats. None whatsoever. You're not even invited. You can't go to meetings; you can't have appointments, except to do it on a sort of private, informal basis.

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So anyway, they all persuaded me to stay on. I talked it over with the Vice President and he said, "Well, you do what you think is best." So I decided it was best for me to stay for a few weeks, then return to the United States, collect my wife and children, and come back about the time that the King would be returning to Bangkok, and then present my credentials and be in business.

I found that there was what I called a traumatic experience going on in Bangkok in 1961. I would say my first problem was the sharp descent of Thai confidence in the United States' intentions over Laos—the Bangkok government, but also people around the Bangkok elite and a little bit further than that out. It was a tiny percentage of the total people, but the decision makers in Thailand were beginning to say that the United States was untrustworthy, we were a bad ally; we didn't keep our promises; and that Thailand should reconsider its whole foreign

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policy and its relationship. So, in the meantime, I returned to Washington for a week. And while I was in Bangkok I had the mission, U.S. mission, prepare a set of recommendations on what the United States should do in Thailand—sort of, "Let's start from scratch with a clean piece of paper." "What would you do, General?" "What would you do, head of the AID [Agency for International Development] mission?" "What would you do [REDACTED] and USIS [United States Information Service, aka USIA]?" Something like that. They put together a fairly longish document which we didn't have time to cut back and took it back to Washington and proposed this as the U.S. program for Thailand. It was more or less accepted with the understanding that parts of it go either to the coordinating group...

O'BRIEN: The OCB [Operations Coordinating Board]?

YOUNG: Well, the trouble was at this point there wasn't really anything. So what I did was to describe it in detail to President Kennedy and

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ask him to back me up on it because there was a lot of new things in it. There were a lot of changes in our organization and the program and so forth. I think he just said yes to get me—you know, like that—and get on with your business. So we did.

O'BRIEN: In doing this, though, you went apparently right over the State Department in the way of channels, Did you get any feedback on that?

YOUNG: No, no, this was an inter-departmental thing.

O'BRIEN: Oh, I see.

YOUNG: They had set up two meetings, two long afternoons on an inter-department basis, sort of at the sub-assistance secretary level, to consider these suggestions. Now most of the suggestions were in the AID field, you see, so they.... It was AID and the Pentagon, a little bit USIS [REDACTED] but not so much so. The State Department was not involved because it didn't cost them any money.

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O'BRIEN: Can you remember some of those suggestions which you made at that time?

YOUNG: No, I'd have to sort of think back because there was a genesis of this which went through several stages. At that time it was more of a question of putting our efforts into more decentralized, more rural, health education, road building (small roads), small arms, getting more mobility for counter-insurgency effort, village development, a different kind of information through the Thais, (mobile information teams), changing the kind of equipment and training for the Thai army—which never worked, I don't think, much because the Pentagon wouldn't do that—an increase in aid for Thailand in amounts, holding back on the shift from grants to loans—doing it over a phased period of time. It seemed to me those were some of the things  
Then when I got back I found that in the summer that the Russians were making a

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very strong effort to woo the Thais. And has so often happened in diplomacy and in the history of Thailand's diplomacy the same man that was delegated by the Prime Minister, Sarit [Sarit Thanarat], to deal with me on American aid policies and changes in programs was the same man who was getting proposals from Russia, which we knew. I don't think the Russians knew, nor did the Thais know, that we knew so much about what was going on. Maybe they knew. But, in any event, that was one of the interesting sidelights. Again, this is on a secret or more.... To know that when I would have an appointment with this man, Luang Wichit [Luang Wichitwathakan], special assistant to the Prime Minister—copied somewhat after the special assistant to the President, you know. I would have two hours with him, with our AID man and two or three others on these various aspects of a

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joint program. And he would see the Soviet Ambassador that afternoon, or he would have seen him the day before or something like that, and I would have a pretty good idea of what he had said to the Soviet Ambassador and what the Soviet Ambassador was proposing. Obviously what they were doing was playing us off against the Russians in both cases, although they never mentioned to me any of these conversations with the Russians. That was the deep dark of night. And I don't think there were many more than two or three Thais who knew that the Russians and this guy, with Sarit's approval.... How far—he went a little



further than Sarit... But, in any event, this was all part of about a year or so of deep displeasure and distrust, trauma in Bangkok. And this was my main problem.

My second problem was the U.S. mission because it was so unwieldy, autonomous, uncoordinated, uncorrelated in the action agencies. MAAG [Military

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Assistance Advisory Group] didn't have any idea what AID was doing, and USIA trying to act as sort of a go between or they would do information work for the MAAG mission and also for the AID use on. And the Agency was all on its own, and the Embassy political-economic section pretty much apart. So we had quite a time welding this what was then large mission. It seemed to me it was too big.

So the two things that I set as priorities as far as the Americans in Thailand were concerned was, one, to make a coordinated organization with an executive direction, an executive leadership, which is very difficult to do, and, secondly, to prune it. I think I got some results in the first and none in the second.

O'BRIEN: The Kennedy Administration about this time issued the so-called Country Team Directive. Did you have anything to do with initiating that?

YOUNG: No. I was on the receiving end of it.

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O'BRIEN: In some ways, you had some of the same problems that Ambassador Brown [Winthrop G. Brown] had had in Laos, as I read things like Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] and some of the recent books that have been put out.

YOUNG: To some extent, except we didn't have any really sharp divergence of one agency really operating on its own in secret without the Ambassador or other members knowing what it was doing—

 Although no one would probably believe you. But, anyway.

This was a question of, I think, a MAAG

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chief, the generals in particular, who wanted to run their own show and do what they damn well pleased with the Thais and not interfered with by the Embassy or the Ambassador. The AID people were very much the same way. They wanted to become as autonomous as possible.

So, in an ordinary case in a country that's not in a critical area like Southeast Asia, a certain amount of autonomy is good. But when you're trying to gear yourself up for—or when you're told by the President, as Kennedy told me—to, you know, get Thailand as strongly prepared for the future as possible, it does take a coordinated effort.

I found American

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programs of all kinds scattered all over Thailand and no correlation among them. And this meant Thai programs, too, but in which we were putting equipment and technical assistance. Not money, but in a sense the taxpayer's money was just being scattered all over the place. You know, it was like the stuff you use for snow removal. You buy a box of it, and if you take it in a big shovel and just shovel it like that into the air and it spreads all over the place, you're not going to get rid of your snow. But if you concentrate it here, either on your sidewalk before the snow comes or after the snow has come, like that, you remove that snow.

So what we tried to do, and what we succeeded in doing, was to concentrate American efforts in priority areas and target zones through the development of a country plan, the Internal Secretary Program for Thailand. It took me about a year to get that in final shape and to get everybody involved in it to understand

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that this was the control document for all elements of the mission and that they were to be guided by the targets set in that, approved by the special group back in Washington, which they're still using.

O'BRIEN: You mean this was the CI group, the so-called counterinsurgency group?

YOUNG: That's right.

O'BRIEN: In areas of Thailand, what particular areas were singled out geographically for these aid efforts?

YOUNG: The northeast was first priority as the Thais determined it, the Thai government, the north was second and the south, the long peninsula, was made third in a priority sense that the first resources go into the northeast, what you have left goes to the north, and if you have anything left it goes to the south. Kind

of that way. Although it didn't mean that the south and the north were totally neglected, by any means. But

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the northeast was put first in terms of attention and resources and organization.

O'BRIEN: Getting back to your initial appointment as Ambassador and the time following your appointment, did anyone in the White House brief you on Administration attitudes or hopes or desires for Southeast Asia, and, well, the State Department as well? Do you recall any...

YOUNG: No. There was not nearly as much of that as there should have been. And I always ascribed that (a) on my own lack of initiative and (b) the initial process of a new administration where everybody was sort of bumping around everybody else. And then also the kind of heady atmosphere that I think we lived through from January into May when I left, in Washington.

Now, I did have some discussions with Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] in the White House, just a couple of brief ones with Mac Bundy, I remember, and with the President. Dean Rusk never got very much involved in this, as I recall, at that time.

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Bowles quite a bit, but on a very broad Asia basis. You know, China, India, Southeast Asia, and the Mekong project—we talked about that quite a lot. Then there were the briefings for the Johnson trip. But also at the same time, you remember, we were very much involved in Laos. This was the thing that was taking most of everybody's time. And I got involved in that, on the Laos planning group. In fact, they set me up as kind of chairman of the Laos task force preparing for this conference. It was very interesting; I learned a lot about it.

While I was doing that I was also doing the briefings for Bangkok. And that's one of the most, or used to be—and I gather from some of my colleagues, still is—a highly unsystematic effort and utter confusion, if not frustration. Because what happens is you're assigned as Ambassador to, let's say, Nigeria or Nairobi, you know, Kenya or Venezuela or Rome or wherever it is if it's a fairly action

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area where there are programs, your day becomes a series of heterogeneous appointments. At 9 o'clock you see somebody on the Maritime Commission; at 10:30 you'll see somebody up on the Hill; at 12 o'clock you'll meet with the Undersecretary of the Army for Mobilization; and then at 2 o'clock out to CIA; at 4 o'clock you come back and see a Deputy Secretary for Administration in the State Department. And then the next day and the next day. And I said, you know, "Why can't we organize this so that we have one day at the Pentagon or two days and then another block of time with CIA, another block of time with AID, another block of time...."

Well, you might just as well, you know, put up a Christmas tree in August. Humanly speaking, the way Washington is worked out and the bureaucracy, it doesn't work that way because you're seeing sort of top

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level people, a lot of whom want to see you because they have some particular interest in the country to which you're assigned. And they can see you at 10 o'clock, so that's when you see the Under Secretary of Agriculture about something.

O'BRIEN: Did J. Graham Parsons [James Graham Parsons] have much of a carry-over into the first stages of the first months of the Kennedy Administration?

YOUNG: My recollection is that Jeff [James Graham Parsons] was pretty much on the sidelines just as a carry-over. He represented the Eisenhower Administration policy on Laos. The Kennedy Administration or some of the people at the top of the Kennedy Administration felt that was a terrible policy, that those who were associated with it, Jeff Parsons and John Steeves [John M. Steeves], were more or less ignored by the New Frontier when they came in.

This was one of the gaps—that here were two men whom I liked and worked with and yet, you know, it was

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kind of pathetic. Not very smart, either. This, "We know all the answers," kind of thing was the attitude that we had in the New Frontier. Then Walter McConaughy [Walter P. McConaughy] came in to replace Parsons. He stayed, I think, until the fall when he was shifted and Harriman [William Averell Harriman] was offered to be Assistant Secretary of State.

O'BRIEN: Who were some of the more imaginative people in regard to Southeast Asia policy—well, let's don't link imagination with influence in those early months of the Kennedy Administration.

YOUNG: I'd have to scratch my memory to remember who was there.

O'BRIEN: Who was getting through, in a sense, in the way of advice to the people who were in the key decision making positions here?

YOUNG: Well, the two issues that I was involved in were Laos and then Vietnam. Laos, there were many meetings in the Cabinet Room in the White House and also over in the State Department on the seventh floor, either with the President or with his brother [Robert F. Kennedy], who very often would

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chair the meeting after the President would leave. You know, five or ten minutes, then he'd have some appointment or have to go somewhere, and so everybody would sit around the room. The main issue then I think was, "How far do we go?" or "What are our options?" And the military from the Pentagon had a number of suggestions. In fact, I remember one meeting in which the four Chiefs of Staff or the chairman in the three services and the Marine—the five of them each had five different propositions almost mutually exclusive. And it was really a pretty bad performance. I think that was the time when the President was there at the table. The Admiral recommended doing this, and the Air Force General said something else, and the Army man said something else about what we could do in Laos to stop the war there by our military intervention and various SEATO [Southeast Asian Treaty Organization] plans. That was the issue

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there. I don't think the State Department, as I recall—I can't seem to picture the State Department being very much involved in that, either Rusk or Bowles or.... The Assistant Secretary, you see, was—you get into this.... This was the hang up there, the olds and the news. This is before Harriman was in the picture. Then there was the desk level, you know, the specialists level. Several of those fellows were getting the details and that kind of thing. And then we had this task force, sort of, which was on the conference. But prior to the Bay of Pigs, which changed everything as far as Laos was concerned, I think.

And on Vietnam the initiative largely came from the Pentagon. In 1961 in April and May the initiative came largely from McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric], General—oh gosh...

O'BRIEN: Lemnitzer [Lyman L. Lemnitzer]?

YOUNG: No. He was in Saigon. Not Magruder [Carter B. Magruder]. McCarr [Lionel C. McCarr]

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and Ed Lansdale [Edward G. Lansdale] who was then in the Pentagon, of course, as a special assistant. I've forgotten what role he had. He hadn't been in Vietnam for four or five years, stationed there, but he'd been back two or three times. And so we got involved in these top secret position papers on Vietnam for the President: what to do about it? Again, do something or you lose it. And Laos, too, and then Thailand. I almost got sent to Vietnam instead of Bangkok.

O'BRIEN: What you're suggesting here, then is that there was a total concept of Vietnam—not of Vietnam, rather but Southeast Asia—that many of the same people were sitting in on all of the decisions and were looking at Southeast Asia as an area and the inter-relationships...

YOUNG: No, I don't think so. I think this was one of my complaints, that the issue of Laos was being discussed in the Cabinet Room as just one piece of real estate plucked out of the

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map and stuck over there without much relationship to Vietnam or Thailand or China, and we didn't really ever bring China into this picture—you know, the interests of China, the whole thing. And Vietnam again became separate, just like Thailand. This has been the weakness of American policy in Southeast Asia from the very start.

O'BRIEN: That spring you had several visits with President Kennedy. One was with Ambassador Baldwin [Charles F. Baldwin]—you were along with, I believe, Ambassador Reischauer [Edwin O. Reischauer] and Baldwin. You don't happen to recall any of the details of that, do you?

YOUNG: Baldwin, Reischauer and also Galbraith [John. Kenneth Galbraith].

O'BRIEN: Right.

YOUNG: Four of us.

O'BRIEN: Was this just a kind of a formality more than anything else?

YOUNG: Yes, it was polishing off four ambassadors for one, you know. This was kind of the formal meeting with the

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President before you went out. And I saw him again individually. As I remember, we came into the little hallway there. I don't know how we sort of trooped in. But anyway, we got in so that Galbraith took the chair on the President's left near the edge of the desk, and I think Reischauer was next, and Baldwin was sort of here, and I ended up over there. And Kennedy sort of went from first to Galbraith and sort of kidded with him a little bit, "Obviously, Ken, we're just going through a formality." I mean that was my interpretation of it. And then he shifted to Reischauer, and here was a stranger. The three of us were more or less in the category of kind of strangers, you know, at least in this role. So, "Well, Ambassador, when are you..." And he always called people Ambassador. He never said Mister Ambassador, which was the regular way of doing

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things, you know. A nice style that Kennedy had of changing things a little bit. And it was, "Ambassador"—very quick, just a couple of questions to Reischauer, as I remember. Then to

Baldwin, “Well, Malaysia. That’s an interesting place.” And then when he came to me he mentioned several.... Mainly Laos. This was what was on his mind, and so he talked about several places in Laos, could they be defended and how far in were they and what kind of logistics support did we need in Thailand. And, “Well, Ambassador, that’s a very important assignment. I wish you well.” And he stood up and we filed out. That was it.

O’BRIEN: A little later you paid a visit on him and I believe you were accompanied by the Thai Ambassador, a little later on in April.

YOUNG: That’s right.

O’BRIEN: You don’t happen to recall that, any of the

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details of that, do you?

YOUNG: No. I can’t even remember why we —why did the Ambassador come to see him? Have you got anything on that in your notes?

O’BRIEN: No, I picked these up out of the White House Appointments....

YOUNG: Because there was something in the paper about that. I remember a press release.

O’BRIEN: As I recall, the Laotian situation was deteriorating, and this crisis of confidence was very much there at about the same time. In fact, in late March hadn’t the SEATO meeting just taken place and Secretary Rusk had been in Bangkok?

YOUNG: Yes, I think that was in April, this meeting. Yes, I guess the Thai government did—I guess he did bring in a note to the President from his government and left it with him because I remember taking it out and registering and that sort of thing here in the White House. We had a very—all I remember about it was that it

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was rather short, ten or fifteen minutes, kind of an exchange of some generalities. But I have to really think about it to.... There must have been a memorandum don—didn’t I write up a memorandum of conversation on it?

O’BRIEN: I haven’t seen it. I haven’t researched that deeply.

YOUNG: You haven’t gone into that deeply?

O'BRIEN: A little later that month, in fact at the end of the month, you sat in on a National Security Council [NSC] Meeting at the end of April which lasted for two and a half hours. You don't happen to recall the general areas that that covered?

YOUNG: Probably Laos. There were so many of those meetings in the White House that were both Security Council as well as sort of an ad hoc Security Council.

O'BRIEN: Do you feel at about that time that the Administration had really developed a rather clear idea of policy for Thailand and Laos, by

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the end of April and May when some of these problems were beginning to develop?

YOUNG: My recollection is that the President was developing a policy, beginning to focus in on Laos before the Bay of Pigs fiasco. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco the whole discussion of Laos changed.

O'BRIEN: So that's a major turning point?

YOUNG: I think so.

O'BRIEN: Why do you suppose that is a major turning point?

YOUNG: Well, my guess is—and it's only inference because I was not involved in the Bay of Pigs thing and only read about it in the newspaper. I remember that afternoon in the Washington newspaper about the disaster. Suddenly. It's the first I heard of it. And then two or three days we had to stop because this was what was taking everybody's time.

So I remember the next time we did get together about Laos, either in the White House or over at

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the State Department, it was kind of—the mood was different, much more subdued and much more cautious and much less anxious to get involved. Because the issue in Laos in the spring of '61 was whether or not there should be any kind of SEATO military intervention under SEATO Plan 5 to occupy areas across the Mekong River as a holding operation in order to prevent any further loss of Laos. Kind of a coordinate Thailand-Laos-Vietnam plan which the SEATO planners had developed for several years.



And I think what happened was that at some point in there—I've forgotten whether it was before the Bay of Pigs or afterwards; I believe it was afterwards—Kennedy asked a number of the congressional leaders to come see him, as it was described to us afterwards as we were debriefed on it. And he said, "Do you or do you not favor military intervention in Laos?" He just went right around the room this way. And they all said no. So that

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was that. And then it meant that his option of trying to develop that as a counter to get a negotiated settlement going that would be favorable or less unfavorable was weakened, and so he had to accept the conference at Geneva before a ceasefire was agreed to in May and June and proceed along the lines of the Geneva Conference from then on out.

O'BRIEN: How did you see the alternatives here for policy towards Laos? What alternatives did you see in regard to possible roles of the United States?

YOUNG: Well, several options. One that I thought we should have negotiated on was a different territorial arrangement in Laos. The borders of Laos are very artificial. They were affixed by the French. They don't reflect the political or ethnic realities whatsoever. And so we—I put together with a couple of people who knew Laos from A to Z what we called the Red, White and Blue Plan for Laos which took the.... The

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Red part was the Communist part, accept them as the de facto authority in two or three of the provinces way up in the North. The blue part was to be the center around Luang Prabang and part of the Central Plains which was to be a neutralized area, at least a free city in Luang Prabang under United Nations auspices. And then the White part was the southern part of Laos, which was to be the non-Communist forces, Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi [Phoumi Nosavan] and the Souphanouvong family and the na Champassak [Sisouk na Champassak] family.

The families are the important things in Laos, these three or four major families. Politics step from the family relationships in the north, the central and the south. And a negotiated settlement might be worked out on the basis of sort of "If you accept my area, I'll accept your area, and we'll sort of have a no man's land in between which we'll have patrolled by the United Nations, demilitarized sort of, not exactly a partition like Korea or Vietnam, North and South,

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but a...." I remember we worked this out on a map very carefully to get the right towns and the valleys. It was, I thought, a very ingenious proposal for negotiations. But of course it didn't get anywhere in the State Department.

O'BRIEN: How about the Thai government; didn't they reject the partitioning idea?

YOUNG: Yes, they—well, not entirely. Not entirely. This was always, during the '61-'62 period, a rather curious sleeper. And I think if the United States had, if Americans had really known a little bit more about it—all of us, including myself—we might have been able to concoct a kind of territorial settlement. Just as I think now in Paris we ought to be thinking about an overall territorial sort of settlement in addition to all the other things that go with it, guarantees and international supervision and so forth, for Laos and Vietnam both.

O'BRIEN: Do you feel that during the Kennedy Administration that the people in the State Department as well as

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the White House ever really developed a sense of the cultural rather than the political nature of Laotian politics?

YOUNG: I think they got a better sense of the possible role of Souvanna Phouma. I think that this was a distinct gain over the previous years. I think those of us who served in the Eisenhower Administration tended, because of the mood and the atmosphere of the time, to suspect Souvanna Phouma or not give him the support and try him out, so to speak, in '56, '57, '58. I remember when he came to Washington for the state visit with Mr. Dulles [John Foster Dulles] and President Eisenhower, and I had to organize that meeting—the position papers and all the rest of it—and we went quite far and a lot of it came through. Dulles' attitude was, "Well, all right, let's see how far we can trust him." But it was, you know, distinctly cool and not trusting at all. I think Souvanna Phouma felt that. Of course he's a very urbane sort of man, and the two personalities

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didn't get along very well, whereas Souvanna and Averell [William Averell Harriman] could have much more of a personal rapport than Dulles and Souvanna could. Decidedly that was a gain. But other and beyond that, no, I don't think that there was much of a sort of political—that the political culture of Laos and these countries was understood by more than one or two people. Somebody like Tom Corcoran [Thomas J. Corcoran], for example, in the State Department who was the Lao desk officer for a while and served in Laos, spoke a little of the language. No.

O'BRIEN: The Thais were not particularly happy with SEATO during those years. Can you discuss some of the reservations—I know we've gone into some of these—but some of the further reservations they had about SEATO.

YOUNG: France. And this is a very interesting subject of diplomatic history which

goes back into the 1880s, particularly 1890s. Thai government

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officials and certainly those responsible for the security of the country, are highly suspicious of the French. I have to generalize on this, so it's a little bit too oversimplified. But the Thais have been confronted by the French for the past sixty or seventy years—more than that, over a hundred now—and many, many incidents which were disgusting or disagreeable or rotten. There was the one in which the French consul, whose name you still hear, in 1863 who virtually ordered the Thais to do this and do that in Bangkok. Obgereck, famous case. And then the French in the 1880s and 90s and 1907, then you see again in 1946 the Thais came up against the French for the return of those territories. And the French were beastly, really pretty bad, the French colonialists. So it's just been a constant antagonism.

And the French because of the Khmer had taken on some of the Cambodian dislike and hostility for the Thai. And if you read most books by

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Frenchmen on Southeast Asia you find a very anti-Thai bias. Art books, for instance, very amusing. My wife, who specializes in Asian art, was just reading to me a week ago from a new book she bought by a French archeologist on Indochina the way he disposes of the Thai, the Thai civilization and so forth and so on.

Well—so, in SEATO France is one of the members, and the French do everything in Laos as opposite to what the Thais want. Either they won't take a position or they say there's no danger or they won't issue the report, et cetera, et cetera. Just a whole succession of little tiny trivial things as well as some major things. So what it amounted to was a French veto in SEATO. The disillusionment with SEATO came over the French opposition, seconded to some extent by the British who were lukewarm about Laos.

Now for the Thais, Laos is their frontier. The French could care less about it in France or de Gaulle [Charles de Gaulle], you know, and that sort of

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thing, but to the Thais they look upon this area as an indefensible frontier because the Mekong River which is the border, the political border of the frontier, you know, it's like the Hudson or the Mississippi—it isn't a frontier, it's a valley—and anybody who gets into that valley, especially backed by China or Hanoi and the North Vietnamese is putting a dagger...

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

...in the heart of Thailand. So the Thais said, "Well, if the French are going to void this organization, if they're going to exercise a de facto veto, if they're going to prevent SEATO action to protect our security according to the terms of the treaty, then we either amend the treaty or we get out of it. It's one or the other," logically. And so they in '61 into '62 were

going on both tracks. Sort of, “Let’s amend it by removing the veto,” expressly so that you could have SEATO action by a majority or six.

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And so they had several proposals in the Council. Or, “Get rid of SEATO; we’ll pull out of SEATO,” which they threatened several times to do, publicly.

O’BRIEN: Did Marshal Sarit consider unilateral action when things were deteriorating in 1960 and early in 1961?

YOUNG: Not in ’61, no. Not that I recall. No, I don’t think so. I think he had given up that possibility.

O’BRIEN: Why did Marshal Sarit want a strongly pro-western government of the type of General Phoumi?

YOUNG: Well, I think because of the protection for Thailand, a buffer state, with a man he knew or he could trust and some kinship, which I never could track down. Whether he was actually his nephew—you know how these are, these big family systems. You never know. But there was probably some kinship, some blood relationship there with Phoumi and the generals. And there again, one military man is more inclined to want another military man than otherwise.

Also, the Thais were very suspicious

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of Souvanna Phouma at this period. They felt he was just—either a crypto-Communist or a neutralist who would play their game or a man who didn’t really see the dangers of Communist infiltration, who was so high minded, naïve or blind and who did not have the force or the political backing. For any of these reasons the Thais felt he would just become the tool of the infiltration under the coalition government, the troika, and that if the Communists got the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense and one or two others—and this is what a lot of the Laos hang-up was over—that they would use that as they had elsewhere. And the Thais pointed to countries like Czechoslovakia. They said, “If they could do this in Europe with the Czechs who were much more politically sophisticated than Laos, think what’s going to happen in Laos.”

O’BRIEN: The French were a bit skeptical about the existence of crises in Laos throughout this. Do you think there’s any justification to that?

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YOUNG: No, I think they were just trying to tone down a crisis for their own interest. I think the French have been playing a lone game in Indochina

because they're the ex-colonial ruler and therefore they look at everything in terms of how it helps France and now it helps kind of their ex parte reputation as well as their own interests there, commercial and cultural.

O'BRIEN: Then these were real crises rather than, as the French sometimes suggested, manufactured...

YOUNG: Some of them were. Not always, but some of them were.

O'BRIEN: In this case, what were some of the real crises and what were some of the manufactured crises?

YOUNG: In Laos?

O'BRIEN: Yes. Do you happen to recall anything...

YOUNG: Well, I think that—you know, every once in a while there'd be a military operation which would look like a crisis building up, and several towns being taken, and the government was....

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People in Vientiane would begin talking against each other or demanding very radical actions. "You must do this. You must do this. Otherwise we're going to collapse." And it turned out that a squad of ten Pathet Lao had surrounded an outlying house in the village, and that was that.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into the SEATO meetings that took place in March 1961 when Secretary Rusk was in Bangkok?

YOUNG: That was before I went out there. I was in Washington then.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into Washington thinking on what was going on then?

YOUNG: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Could you discuss some of that; how we were at that time following the events in Bangkok?

YOUNG: I think this was the, part of the marched his troops up the hill and then marched them down again, you know. We sort of went to Bangkok with a pretty strong position. Then it got

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watered down by the French and the British there who wanted, you know, “Don’t mention Laos. We’ve got to negotiate it out,” and all that sort of thing. So the American position was somewhat a retreat. And this shocked the Thais very much.

O’BRIEN: Some presidential and military advisers—and I don’t know whether it was this early, but—were advising putting troops into the Mekong Valley at that time. Did this come up at any of those meetings that...

YOUNG: In the White House?

O’BRIEN: Right.

YOUNG: Yes, and this might have been at this NSC meeting. A great deal of the discussion was over the, you know, the options and the types and locations and logistics. One of the arguments against our putting troops into this area was the lack of logistic support. You didn’t have the port in Thailand, and you didn’t have the airbases to follow through. I remember General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor], for one, was very emphatic about

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this in Laos. He was the Army. Now the Air Force, they didn’t seem to be so concerned about that. They said, “Just bomb them. That’s the way to stop a guerilla warfare. Just turn the bombers loose and that will take care of it.” I remember LeMay [Curtis E. LeMay] saying that with a cigar in his mouth.

O’BRIEN: Well, this was Rostow’s Plan VI, wasn’t it?

YOUNG: Yes. Then there was Plan VI.

O’BRIEN: Did Plan VI ever really receive any consideration?

YOUNG: I think it was coming close to some consideration and revising, and the Pentagon people would be told to go back, you know, and refine them. I’ve always felt that if the Pentagon had had a well thought out single position then, in March, in early April—prior to the Bay of Pigs anyway—that if the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had presented this as the Joint Chiefs’ plan for Laos on the military side, “The military requirements, Mr. President, to handle this situation,” that it might very well have been accepted because I

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don’t think there was opposition in the State Department at that time to this kind of holding thing. You go in at a hold, sort of the ’54 cease-fire. You intervene to make a cease fire work.

By being there there's no war, there's no military operation. You see, this was the argument. And then you withdraw your forces once you have a negotiating and an agreement. I think that was kind of the theory of this thing. But the trouble was that the military characters couldn't agree among themselves.

O'BRIEN: There's been some hint...

YOUNG: They were a shambles really, I felt, at the time.

O'BRIEN: Did you see any signs of disillusionment within the Administration with the military and a while later in the CIA as a result of this and the Bay of Pigs?

YOUNG: Yes. I couldn't put my finger on it specifically, but I think we all sort of felt indirectly, secondhand or third-hand, that these two things together,

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this inability to focus—Laos was just kind of a sponge, you know, like a big hunk of cheese. And then the Bay of Pigs thing. The same people, you see, were involved. The same individuals sitting around the table talking about Laos were also the same individuals who put together the Bay of Pigs and guaranteed to President Kennedy that it would work, the same five military men, the same CIA people—then you had different people in the State Department, though, the civilians, you know, because this was a very closely held operation with the Cuba desk, two or three of them. And then on our side...

O'BRIEN: Well, in that time, too, the Soviets agreed to an international conference—this was the British proposal—to an international conference on Laos. And then later they agreed to a ceasefire. Was there much confidence within the Administration that they could actually bring about a ceasefire in Laos, that they had, in a sense, the ability to do it?

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YOUNG: Well, I—yes, I think it was, as I recall, accepted that they could persuade their allies to work it out, come to a ceasefire, otherwise there wouldn't be any conference. There was always this latent danger of American military intervention.

And I would like to emphasize that President Kennedy and his brother understood the use of power and the use of American military power, that the Seventh Fleet moving down into those waters was a signal of some importance, and that they established the alternates of power. That is, "If you don't go for diplomacy, you have to go to power. Do you want that?" Now if you remove the power part from the equation, even if it's only for a sort of bargaining purposes, posturing, and you're left only with diplomacy, in negotiating with the

Communists I think you've reduced your maneuverability and your leverage by much more than 50 per cent.

This is our problem now in Paris. They attack fifty cities; they rocket Saigon,

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despite the agreement last fall. We don't do anything about it, so they can just keep on doing this. We've removed a leverage in terms of diplomatic results, not in terms of resuming the way or bombing the north again, but in getting the diplomatic outcome because this gets into the area of incentives and inducements. And it's a complicated and rather dangerous business, this management of crises control to bring about a negotiated settlement.

But I think that in those meetings in the Pentagon as well as in the National Security Council, the one you referred to—though I don't remember the exact details of that one because there were several of these things—there was, I thought, an understanding on the part of the two Kennedy brothers of how our ability to have power there would help negotiation. There were other people who didn't seem to have this understanding. And when we got into this question of establishing

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several different options, you know, on Laos and we'd have to go back and write another—rewrite the papers or something. The Pentagon would go back to do something and we'd go back to do something, and the CIA would go back to do something. We seemed to be always going back, getting more information and returning again, never sort of getting a resolution.

O'BRIEN: When President Kennedy came in he gave a speech in those initial weeks on an uncommitted Laos and made some suggestions along this line that were counter, perhaps, to what Thailand had been moving in the direction of. Did you get any feedback on this?

YOUNG: From the Thais?

O'BRIEN: Yes, from the Thais. And how did you react to these initial pronouncements on Thailand?

YOUNG: On Thailand or on Laos?

O'BRIEN: On Laos.

YOUNG: Well, on Laos. Well, I must say I felt that a tough policy, a strong policy at that time

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was what would bring us to a negotiated settlement, rather than following the French and the British line which was to sue for a conference and agree to whatever terms you had to, more or less a coalition without any safeguards in it. That's basically what they were saying. "Laos isn't worth it. Nobody has any interests there. For heaven's sake, don't make a crisis out of Laos," is what the British and the French were saying.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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