

State Dept.'s Muddles Disenchanted

As crises mounted, so did President Kennedy's feeling of frustration over the State Department.

Tenth in a Series

By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

The frustrations of the summer of 1961 over the Berlin crisis brought the President's discontent with his Department of State to a climax. One muddle after another — the Department's acquiescence in the Bay of Pigs, the fecklessness of its recommendations after the disaster, the ordeal of trying to change its attitude toward Laos, the apparent impossibility of developing a negotiating position for Berlin — left Kennedy with little doubt that the State Department was not yet an instrumentality fully and promptly responsive to presidential purpose.

He well understood the difficulty of converting a tradition-ridden bureaucracy into a mechanism for swift information and decision. But resistance was no less great in Defense, where McNamara was plainly making progress in annexing the Pentagon to the United States Government. Other departments provided quick answers to presidential questions and quick action on presidential orders. It was a constant puzzle to Kennedy that the State Department remained so formless and impenetrable.

He would say, "Damn it, Bundy and I get more done in one day in the White House than they do in six months in the State Department." They never have any ideas over there," he complained, "never come up with anything new." "The State Department is a bowl of jelly," he told Hugh Sidey of *Time* in the summer of 1961.

Observers to Operators

Kennedy had come to the Presidency determined to make the Department of State the central point, below the presidency itself, in the conduct of foreign affairs. He had great sympathy for the diplomatic enterprise and in other circumstances would have liked to be an ambassador himself. The Foreign Ser-

vice, moreover, was the elite unit of the American government.

Yet the role of the Foreign Service had changed in the years since the Second World War. The role of American diplomacy in pre-war days had been largely spectatorial and ceremonial. But in the postwar world our diplomats could no longer be merely observers. They were operators in more than a hundred countries around the planet, and they needed regional knowledge and technical skill as well as personal initiative to make their interventions effective. But in many cases the older career men deplored the new tendencies toward specialization, whether functional or (except for the Russia and China services) regional.

Nearly every problem inherent in the Foreign Service process had been compounded by its prodigious growth. In 1930 the Department of State had a budget of about \$15 million, the total membership of the Foreign Service was about 1700, and the telegraphic traffic for the whole year amounted to little more than two million words. By the 1960s State had a budget rising toward \$300 million, there were over 9000 in the Foreign Service, and every two months the telegraphic traffic was greater than in all 1930.

As it grew in size, the Department diminished in usefulness. This was in part the consequence of bureaucratization. "Layering" — the bureaucrat's term for the imposition of one level of administrative responsibility on top of another—created a system of "concurrences," which required every proposal to run a hopelessly intricate obstacle course before it could become policy. Obviously clearance was necessary to avoid anarchy, but it often became an excuse for doing as little as possible.

The mounting unwieldiness of the procedures drove former Ambassador George F. Kennan to the gloomy conclusion that, in really delicate and urgent situations, "American statesmen will have to take refuge in a bypassing of the regu-

lar machinery and in the creation of ad hoc devices—kitchen cabinets, personal envoys, foreign offices within foreign offices, and personal diplomacy—to assure the intimacy of association, the speed, the privacy, and the expression of personal style essential to any effective diplomacy."

McCarthyism's Shock

Bureaucratization was only part of the explanation for State's malaise when Kennedy came to office. The other part was the shock of McCarthy — or rather the shock of the readiness of Dulles [John Foster] as Secretary of State, to yield up Foreign Service officers to McCarthyism. Circumspection had always eased the path to advancement in the Service; now it became a requirement for survival. The McCarthy era, by demonstrating the peril of dangerous thoughts, elevated conformism into a conditioned reflex. Career men stopped telling Washington what they really thought and consecrated themselves to the clichés of the cold war. Some did this more skillfully than others, and the result was that cautious mediocrities rose to the top of the Service, along with those most uncritically committed to the cold-war view of the world.

Worst of all, bureaucratization and McCarthyism had strengthened the most defensive and conservative impulses within the Foreign Service. I remember sitting in our Georgetown garden on an August night in 1961 when Harriman came back to Washington during a break in the interminable Geneva conference on Laos. The Foreign Service, he

said, had been so thoroughly brainwashed by Dulles that it almost required what the Chinese called "thought correction" in order to adjust to the New Frontier. The Service, he added sadly, had declined greatly in purpose, clarity and liberalism since he had last known it.

One's own experience documented this resistance to the spirit of the new administration. When Jose Figueres came to Washington in the spring of 1961, our embassy in San Jose cabled that it viewed the prospect of his seeing President Kennedy "with consternation"; it feared that a meeting with the former president of Costa Rica would upset the present Costa Rican regime. Naturally Kennedy wanted to talk to a leader of Latin American democracy who had been among the first to endorse the Alliance for Progress and whose knowledge and influence went far beyond the borders of his own small country. The Department in Washington, more sensitive to the new mood, interposed no obstacle, the meeting took place, and the Costa Rican regime survived. But it was a constant struggle.

Risk vs. Opportunity

One almost concluded that the definition of a Foreign Service officer was a man for whom the risks always outweighed the opportunities. Career officers had always tended to believe that the foreign policy of the United States was their institutional, if not their personal, property, to be solicitously protected against interference from the White House and other misguided amateurs; and by

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1961, those favored in the Dulles years added to this proprietary instinct, an immovable devotion to the attitudes of the past, whether good or bad.

The hardest thing of all was to change anything — attitudes, programs, cliches. This dedication to the past found its ultimate sanction in what seemed the Service's unshakable determination to protect those who, if wrong, were wrong in the right way and to penalize those who, though right, were right out of channels or out of cadence. The Foreign Service operated as a sort of benevolent society, taking care of its worst as well as — sometimes better than — its best. The promotion system was in effect a conspiracy of the conventional against the unconventional.

On the other hand, zeal for good, but new, policies at the expense of bad, but established, ones was likely to gain an officer the reputation for causing trouble and — under the system where the challenged officer wrote the "efficiency reports" — a place at the bottom of his Foreign Service class. When Kennedy ended the unrelenting American opposition to the center-left coalition in Italy, for example, the Deputy Chief of Mission in Rome, who had been single-handedly responsible for the prolongation of that policy long after it had become obsolete, became ambassador to Czechoslovakia; while an intelligent junior officer who had fought prematurely for the new policy in the Rome Embassy was marked down for insubordination, his offense having been that of carrying the case past the



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IN BERMUDA—President Kennedy plants a tree Dec. 1961, at a Bermuda Conference. McGeorge Bundy is at left; right foreground is Prime Minister Macmillan.

D.C.M. to the ambassador. As Averell Harriman told the Jackson Subcommittee in 1963, "I have noted that men because they haven't gotten along with one indi-

vidual have been given very low ratings, when others have given them high ratings. . . . Men with a spark and independence of expression are at times held down,

whereas caution is rewarded."

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