

# KENNEDY ON ORAL HISTORY

*Oral History Director CHARLES STUART KENNEDY received the Forrest C. Pogue Award from the Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region Organization on March 24 in recognition of his outstanding contributions in the field of oral history. Following are excerpts from the acceptance remarks Stu prepared for that occasion.*

My interviewing technique is simple. I put my victim in front of a \$35 Radio Shack cassette recorder and essentially say "Tell me a story." And what a story it has been.

Dealing with the Soviets has been a major focal point of our program. I have accounts going back to the 1940s in the middle of World War II, where my informants describe how the KGB harassed them and how hostile our "ally" was to American diplomats even while America was shipping vast amounts of war supplies to the USSR. . . .

Berlin was the focus of much of the Cold War, as it was considered the most likely place where a conflict could break out. I have heard accounts from those in Berlin, from the airlift of 1948 to the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1962, from the experiences of those who were present in 1963 when KENNEDY said "Ich bin ein Berliner" and in 1989 when REAGAN said "Tear down that wall, Mr. GORBACHEV" to the wall's dismantlement in 1989. . . .

From the American perspective it seems that the French are always trying to thwart American proposals. One man I interviewed, a top NATO official in Brussels, said his young children thought there was a nationality known as "those goddam French," as he would come home from the office, slam his briefcase on the table, and say, "Those goddam French" did such and such.

If you want to know what to do when your embassy is blown up, or when you are in the midst of a war or civil unrest, we have many accounts, including those of ROBERT DILLON, whose embassy in Beirut was hit by Islamic extremists in 1983, and PRUDENCE BUSHNELL, whose embassy in Nairobi was blown up by al-Qaeda in 1998. . . .

Asia is another long-term preoccupation of the United States, with the question of China dominating the scene. I have accounts of our dealings with the CHIANG KAI-SHEK government during World War II and later on Taiwan. . . . The Opening to China is the subject of a number of interviews, from those who accompanied HENRY KISSINGER on his historic trip to Beijing to those who did the actual work of establishing our posts in that huge country. . . .

On Indochina I have interviewed a man who was in Hanoi when the troops of HO CHI MINH took over in 1954 and others who left Saigon and Phnom Penh by the last helicopters in 1975. . . . I am now talking to those who went back after the opening of relations in the last few years.

The African experience is well covered, from the colonial days to the rise of independent nations and that

continent's problems. . . . Several narratives tell of evacuating our embassies in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia under fire, our work in famine relief, trying to end apartheid in South Africa, and our lack of positive response to the Rwanda genocide.

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Latin America oral histories relate dealing with dictators and drug wars and promoting democracy. During the 1980s, our people in Central America, trying to bring order out of chaos, faced nasty right-wing governments and equally nasty communist guerrillas. . . .

As time went on I became more intrigued with the early lives of our subjects, who came from an extremely varied background and included immigrants and the children of immigrants. . . . And, if one wants to do a history of the problems that attitudes toward gender caused in the governmental workplace or the change in the status of minority officers over the years, there is no better place to start one's research than our collection. . . .

Our Foreign Affairs Oral History collection spells out in great detail the internal politics of the Department of State and the policy conflicts with other elements of the government, particularly the Defense and Treasury Departments, the White House, and the Congress.

Thousands of accounts of experiences all

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# Kennedy Speech

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over the globe . . . range from the 1920s to the present. . . . Though we have been developing an oral history of diplomats, we have ended up with a history of the world in the last 60-plus years. The accounts are spotty and overlap, whole decades are missing for some countries, but the richness of this collection is unparalleled. . . .

We envisage the oral history program as continuous. New retirees continue to present themselves with their experiences, and there is no sign that the United States is going to cease being a major diplomatic player.