David Ormsby Gore, who became Lord Harlech after the death of his father in February 1964, served as Ambassador to Washington during the Conservative governments of Harold Macmillan and Alec Douglas-Home and the Labour administration of Harold Wilson. His embassy began with anxieties about Berlin and ended on the eve of the American decision to send combat troops to Vietnam. These were significant years for the Anglo-American relationship. Facing financial problems, the British re-assessed their role in the world and sought membership of the European Economic Community. Although he was Ambassador to the Johnson administration in its first 15 months, it was during the Kennedy administration of 1961–63 that Ormsby Gore made his most significant contribution, building on a unique intimacy with the President. Three issues dominated his embassy: the Cuban missile crisis; the Skybolt problem; and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

Appointment

William David Ormsby Gore, a great-grandson of the Victorian Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, was born in London on 20 May 1918 and educated at Eton and New College, Oxford. He served in the army during the Second World War, reaching the rank of Major. In 1950 he was elected Conservative MP for Oswestry in Shropshire, holding the seat until 1961. In 1940 he married Sylvia, daughter of Hugh Lloyd Thomas, a diplomat and courtier. He was successively Parliamentary Under-Secretary (1956–57) and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (1957–61) under Macmillan, being concerned principally with issues of disarmament and spending a good deal of time at the United Nations (UN). While his aristocratic background gave him the self-confidence
of his class, he did not display the arrogance of many of its members.
He was polite and reserved but could become animated in discussion
and was always energetic in executing his responsibilities. Despite a
poor academic record – he graduated with a third class in History – he
was highly intelligent with a nimble, quick mind.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born the year before Ormsby Gore and
they established friendly relations from their first meeting in 1938,
when Kennedy’s father was American Ambassador in London and JFK
was studying at the London School of Economics. They quickly devel-
oped a rapport, having a taste for both the social scene and politics.
According to Barbara Leaming, ‘Their repartee was swift and sharp; no
sooner had one participant uttered a few words, the other shot back a
deflating reply’.¹ Thus they began what Ormsby Gore later called their
‘twenty-five year conversation’.² After wartime naval service, Kennedy
returned to London in 1945 and they renewed their association, which
was deepened by family ties: in May 1944 Kennedy’s sister, Kathleen,
made Ormsby Gore’s cousin, the Marquess of Hartington. (Tragically,
Hartington was killed in action only four months later, while Kathleen
died in a plane crash in 1948.) Kennedy visited Britain again in 1951, by
which time both men were active in politics, Kennedy having been
elected to Congress in 1946. Ormsby Gore only visited the United States
for the first time in 1954, as part of the British delegation to the UN,
when he spent the weekend at Hyannisport with Kennedy, his new wife
Jacqueline and his family. Thereafter Ormsby Gore and his wife travelled
to America each year and were guests of the Kennedys at Palm Beach or
Hyannisport. He thereby became part of the Kennedy ‘clan’.³

According to Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy’s biographer, ‘When he
was not working, he and Jacqueline liked having people around who
were cheerful, amusing, energetic, informed and informal’. Such people
were ‘sources and sounding boards for independent ideas and informa-
tion…[they] sought, with rare exception, no influence or favors, and
they were all as candid and casual with the Commander in Chief as they
had been when he was a Congressman’.⁴ Their relations were not merely
social. They had similar views on politics and took a particular interest
in foreign affairs. JFK had immense respect for Ormsby Gore and his
views.⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, another insider chronicler of his presidency,
recalls that JFK ‘told friends that, next to David Ormsby Gore,
[McGeorge] Bundy [National Security Advisor] was the brightest man he
had ever known’.⁶ When the Englishman came to New York for the UN
General Assembly debate on disarmament in 1959, he and Kennedy dis-
cussed the topic in depth. Ormsby Gore felt that there was a real chance