NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

## WITHDRAWAL SHEET (PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES)

| FORM OF DOCUMENT | CORRESPONDENTS OR TITLE | DATE | RESTRICTION |
|---|---|---|---|
| ~~interview~~ | ~~portions of pages 6, 8 and 11~~<br>Declassification upheld NSC ltr, 5/23/91 re NLJ 91-74<br>open 7-31-96 NLJ 95-186 | 8/12/69 | A |

FILE LOCATION

Talk with President Johnson
8/12/69 at LBJ Ranch
Present: President Johnson and William J. Jorden
~~Subject: Viet Nam~~

RESTRICTION CODES

(A) Closed by Executive Order 11652 governing access to national security information.
(B) Closed by statute or by the agency which originated the document.
(C) Closed in accordance with restrictions contained in the donor's deed of gift.

# TALK WITH PRESIDENT JOHNSON

DATE: August 12, 1969
PLACE: LBJ Ranch
Present: President Johnson
William J. Jorden

SUBJECT: Viet-Nam

Q. When were you first aware of Viet-Nam as a problem area for the United States:

President: It was most vividly brought to my attention by the conference Secretary Dulles had with the leadership of the Senate in... I believe it was '54 when Nixon announced during that period that we would be putting troops in that area of the world, and Dulles consulted us about supporting the French following the fall of Dien Bien Phu, and as Senate leader I raised some questions with Secretary Dulles the principal one of which was who would go in with us. And as I recall it, he said that he was not very positive what other forces in the world would join with us. And the meeting ended with his agreeing to exchange views with other nations. And following that Senate meeting, though, I think that he and President Eisenhower concluded that there was enough resistance in the Congress, even though Nixon had already announced on behalf of the Administration they were taking that action that they pulled away from it. You'll have to get the exact date of that conference. It's a matter of record and there's been a good deal written about it, I think, in various books. I took the very strong position that we were certainly interested in that part of the world and we wanted to do whatever was appropriate, and required, and desirable, but it was also... we didn't want any unilateral undertaking and that we ought to consult with our allies and see which ones of them were ready to go in with us and after those consultations the Administration did not make any recommendation that we do that. And so the result... the next real recommendation of the Administration was really when President Eisenhower told President Kennedy he felt the first action we would have to take would be in that area -- Laos, and Viet-Nam -- and that he would have taken it except that he did not want to make commitments that another President would have to honor. And so he left it so the President could take what action he thought he ought to take (President Kennedy), but that he (President Eisenhower) felt that action would have to be taken.

Q. What was your involvement as a Senator in the SEATO Treaty deliberations? Did you have any opinion of SEATO at that time?

President: I was not present when the SEATO Treaty was voted upon. I was in Mayo Hospital. Senator Kennedy was not present -- Senator John Kennedy. Senator Dirksen was not. I think all three of us were sick at the time that the treaty was ratified 82-1, with only one vote against it -- Senator Langer from North Dakota. Senator Mansfield went out to Manila and signed as one of the representatives of the United States. Senator Mansfield explained the Treaty as did other Senators on the Foreign Relations Committee, discussed it rather fully. We were familiar with its terms. I did not vote on the question. I believe, though, had I been there and had I heard all the debate, including the reasons set forth by Secretary Dulles and through sending it to the Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Mansfield, and Morse and Fulbright and others who were responsible for it being before the Senate, I would have voted as they did -- for it. Although I did not vote for it and I did not make the commitment because I was sick and not present, I did feel that once we made the commitment that it ought to be carried out. And I regarded it as part of our commitment in that part of the world, although I felt a good many times that other people did not live up to its terms. The fact that another man violates a contract is no reason why I shouldn't abide by my own.

Q. Did you make any Senate speeches or other public statements on SEATO in 1954-55?

President: I did not make any Senate speeches or public statements on SEATO because, as I said, I was not present during that period. I'd been operated on at Mayo's Hospital.

Mr. Jorden: That was early '55, yes. Well, as a result of the French pulling out, we moved in and began to help train the South Vietnamese Army. Do you think that our training of that army for traditional war in the 1950's was a major blunder?

President: Well, I think in retrospect we could improve on a good many steps that we took in that period. I don't think that we have ever received from the South Vietnamese themselves all that we had a right to expect, and all that we desired. We had to consider what we had to work with and do the best we could. And I'm sure that our efforts could have been improved.

Mr. Jorden: What I was thinking there was that it didn't seem very likely that armies were going to march south but that they were going to face a guerrilla war and they weren't really trained for guerrilla war.

President: I think that's right and I think that President Kennedy realized very early in his administration and he discussed it with me, and he was reading everything that he could find on the subject of guerrilla warfare and was organizing the Green Berets and everything else that was calculated to give our troops a new... expertise in that general field, and make them ready and prepared to deal with it. Although I've never been sure that we've actually coped with it as successfully as we should have. And I'm positive that if we had it to do over again that maybe we would have given them different types of training for a different type of situation.

But I was not responsible for the quality of training or the type of training that the South Vietnamese received in the 50's, or even our own people, and I've pretty well been guided in my judgments by the recommendations made by our people. I know that President Kennedy was quite concerned when he came in that we ourselves were not prepared to cope with this guerrilla type warfare and he wanted to equip us for that as quickly as possible. And of course we tried as best we could to equip the South Vietnamese for it. But with the challenges that were raised out there and starting from where we started with modern rifles and things of that kind, we had to supply our own men as quickly as we could. And considering the fact that we had to meet those demands, we have equipped them as quickly as we could within the support the people gave us and within the time we had. And one of the high priorities I gave as President was to give the South Vietnamese better guns, and better training in that particular area. I would not say that... I'm not competent to say it's a major blunder, but I would say that we could all do better in retrospect.

My '61 visit to Saigon was my first trip to Viet-Nam.

Q. Why did President Kennedy send you?

President: I do not know why President Kennedy sent me. I think you ought to go back, and I'm sure he sent a letter to Diem that I presented. And I'm sure he gave me a letter, and maybe a charter, and you ought to review those. I don't remember the details; I know that he wanted me to go and it was early in the Administration and it was an important assignment. And he felt from what President Eisenhower had told him that this was one of his big problems he had to face up to soon.

Q. What were your impressions on that trip? Did you feel Viet-Nam was vital to the United States?

President: My impressions on that trip were incorporated in the report, the written report that I made to him. They're also incorporated in testimony I gave before the Senate Foreign Relations. I met with them when I came back. And I think that the net effect of what I said was that we must support these people and strengthen them in every way we can, we must encourage them and stimulate them to resist this communist aggression. And they said they'll be able to do it without our help; they don't want our boys. But they do need all the financial and military help we can give them to equip them. That was about the net of it.

Q. What are your recollections of Diem? You have been quoted as describing him as the "George Washington of Asia"? Wasn't that an exaggeration?

President: What are my recollections of Diem? I had a fine visit with him and I thought a productive and profitable one. I thought that he... we stressed, according to my instructions from the President and the Secretary of State and others, the importance of social reforms, the importance of making his government more responsive to all the people. And such things as land reform. He was not irritated by this, although I'm sure every visitor he got from the United States during that period was trying to point that out. I tried to combine not only our recommendations and our advice on the necessity for making his government more democratic and more socially conscious, I tried to couple that with stimulating him to believe that he could resist the aggression that he was faced with, and the great power -- communist power -- that was being put against him by Russia and China and the North Vietnamese. I thought he needed that encouragement so I frequently pointed out that when another great power -- not China, not Russia and not North Viet-Nam -- with a joint effort to communist advance and aggression, but when we had a fascism advance and aggression, a great many people started by compromising and by trying to mediate the situation. And Chamberlin came back and thought he had obtained peace in our time, but it remained for Churchill -- who had warned all through the years of these great dangers and the necessity for being equipped to deal with, and his advice had not been taken -- had to rise to the occasion, and even after the Battle of Britain to stand there and provide the inspiration and courage to keep his people in the war after France had gone under and the Maginot Line had failed, and it looked like Hitler was in for a great victory in Europe.

It was almost Churchill's voice alone that maintained the resistance and that held the line until we could go into Normandy and we could equip our people and theirs to successfully resist this aggression. I pointed out all this in all my speeches to the Vietnamese, to the Congress, in the social meetings I had, the governmental meetings I had, and the public speeches I had, and the luncheons that I attended. And I frequently said, referred to a story as I do now, the Churchill story -- it may never have happened; I don't know, it was just a story of the time -- that we have... so little have we done, so much have we yet to do. That's one of my favorite Churchill stories. And during this period I frequently referred to the fact that Churchill standing alone, after the Battle of Britain and after France had fallen, and after it looked like fascism was in the ascendency -- that Churchill almost by himself had provided the courage and the resistance that stopped Hitler. And that I thought that Diem was confronted with a similar situation -- that the advance in that area of the world was going to require some strong person to do what Churchill did. And he said that we'll meet them on the beaches and we'll meet them in the alleys and we'll meet them in the streets, and if everything else fails, before we'll let fascism succeed, we'll use our beer bottles on them. And I pointed out that story to Diem, and said, so you're going to have to meet them in the bushes, and you're going to have to meet them in the mountains, and you're going to have to meet them in the forests, and if everything else fails, you're going to have to be like Churchill -- you're going to have to use your beer bottles on them. Because we cannot let communism take Indo China, or take this area of the world. We cannot let it take South Viet-Nam, because it'll be in Thailand, it'll be in Indonesia, and it'll take all the rest of the area, and be back to Honolulu. Now, the New York Times in typical fashion, and others of liberal tendencies who disapproved of Diem, who didn't object to the aggression, who didn't care about it being taken over, immediately said that Johnson has called Diem the Churchill of Asia -- not the George Washington, but the Churchill of Asia. Which I did not. I said that Diem will have to rise to the occasion and provide the same type of leadership, the same quality of leadership that Churchill did when he was confronted with a similar problem when fascism was on the march. It didn't make any difference whether it was a fascist aggressor or a communist aggressor. They can be stopped, they must be stopped, they ought to be stopped. Churchill stopped them, so you ought to do the same thing. And that was the comment that... there was a Robert Trumbull and a fellow named Tiernan or something out there in that area of the world -- I forgot what his name is, but both of them seemed to be very sympathetic to the aggressors. And both of them seemed to resent that the American Vice President

would try to say that you people have got to stand up here and show some steel, not be the Chamberlins of your time but the Churchills of your time. And that was my thought and that was what I said. And that's what it will show I said. And just like Life magazine this week says that I showed up in Viet-Nam in a cowboy uniform. Well, I showed up in this exact shirt, and this is made by a military tailor and it's a military uniform, and it's a Westmoreland collar and it's the same kind he was wearing, and the same texture and the same quality. And it has nothing in connection with a cowboy. But the fact they say it a dozen times and the New York Times and Life magazine write it, pretty soon you have great big boots on, and spurs, and six shooters, and so on, and so on. And I don't know how you can correct those things. And I never have known how to correct this, but I told you exactly what we said about Diem. I do think that one of the greatest mistakes this country ever made was when we encouraged the South Vietnamese to assassinate this President. I think it was a mistake we made in the Dominican Republic. I never approved of a lot of Diem's methods and certainly a great many of his brother's were as reprehensible as a lot of other brothers' actions. But the fact that they were reprehensible and there was some corruption in the government -- and it wasn't as democratic as we thought it ought to be, in either Viet-Nam or the Dominican Republic -- that we were in no way justified in urging people to assassinate them. And I strongly resisted it, and if I had had my way, it would never have happened. But I was not in a decision making posture at that time. But I have expressed myself every opportunity I've had. I think we did press him as hard as we dared to for internal reform, for broader political involvement, and for a better army. But it's just a question of what you can do with a situation like that.

Q. Did you take an active part in deliberations on Viet-Nam at the end of 1961, at the time of the Taylor Mission? Was JFK keeping you informed? Did he seek your advice?

President: No. Taylor and Rostow went out and made their report and I was familiar with it but I was not consulted about their going, and it was not a matter of decision for me. And my report had already been made and in a general way I was informed, but not specifically and not requested to make a decision or make a recommendation.

Q. Did you have any involvement in V-N question in 1962-63?

President: In general discussions and evaluations, the Taylor Report, and discussions of the whole Laotian situation in that period there, as a general meeting, but not specifically where I did any more than I did on

that trip. I sat in on Security Council meetings, rather seldom made an observation unless I -- had a general policy of never speaking unless I was spoken to and never made a recommendation unless the President asked me, and never differing with him in public. Frequently he and I would talk and I would say, we have this difference and here is my viewpoint. But I never thought it would be appropriate or desirable to debate differences of opinion in open meeting with others. I thought it would be unproductive for the Vice President and President to do it. I raised that question on the Bay of Pigs and the President got very -- I questioned that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended some of the things that they'd been quoted as recommending, because they'd told me otherwise. And when I asked a question in open meeting, the President showed some irritation and said of course they had, and one of the members of the Joint Chiefs sitting right next to me had just told me before we went into the meeting that they hadn't. So I turned to him and said well, I must be misinformed, and so he kind of wobbled around. It was an embarrassing situation so I tried to make it a policy not to. I don't recall any substantial differences that I expressed to the President on Viet Nam. I know that I felt that the wire that Hilsman sent out was a very unwise thing and very undesirable. And both Rusk and McNamara were out of town, and Hilsman wanted to instruct Lodge to go along with the overthrow of Diem. And he took it up with the President who was at Hyannisport and that wire was cleared. And after he got back to town I know there was a general feeling around that we had acted unwisely on Hilsman's impetuousity and the President's approving what he had done. To send the wire was a very dangerous thing to do.

And subsequently I heard Hilsman all over town blaming the Secretary of State, the President and everybody else for what was happening in Viet-Nam. And I told some of my associates in the administration -- I don't remember whether I told the President directly or not -- I tried to tell the people that I thought would get to him and I don't remember just what channel I used. But I thought it was outrageous. I was at a dinner party at Bill White's house and Hilsman was just outright disloyal, not only to the Secretary of State and the President and all of them, but just an anarchist who was fouling his own nest. And when I became President, the first man I instructed to be fired was Hilsman in that place, and I asked McNamara to lend me Bill Bundy to bring over to put in that job. He didn't resign -- I told Rusk he was outright disloyal. I'd heard him at this dinner party with a bunch of newspapermen, just telling what serious mistakes the President had made, and so on and so forth. And it made me think he was working for the enemy. I rather felt he was an employee of the enemy because...

Mr. Jorden: Well, you got rid of him pretty quickly?

President: Yes, sir, just as soon as I could. It took three-four months, but it was one of the first things I did.

Mr. Jorden: It seems to me that Harriman was also involved in that Hilsman message?

President: I don't know but...

Mr. Jorden: But as you say, the Secretary of State was out of town at the time, and...

President: The Secretary of State was out and the Secretary of Defense, too. I think Hilsman was the author of it.

Q. Did you agree with the decision to put pressure on Diem in '63? Were you consulted?

President: No. I didn't agree with it. I thought it was very unwise. And I was not consulted.

Q. Was our policy toward Diem wrong? What would you have done?

President: Was our policy toward Diem wrong? I think it was to assassinate him. I don't think it was to try to bring him along as fast as we could. I don't know what I would have done. I would have done with him just what I tried to do with Thieu -- get him to get a constitution and democratic government and have some land reform, improve his army and do as good as we can. I think there's an extent to what you can do. You can't change a situation overnight. It takes a long, trying time. You've got to be patient and do as much as you can as fast as you can. I don't think we have done as well as we could and I don't think we did it as fast as we could. But with governments changing as often as they did out there, we did it as fast as we dared to.

Q. What was your reaction to the McNamara-Taylor optimism of 1963? What do you think in retrospect?

President: I think that the optimism was greatly exaggerated. And I have read the McNamara statement and, as I recall, he put several conditions on it. He expected that if there was no change of government, and

if there was no infiltration from the North, and if about five different other things, then we could hope to be out of there by '65. But they already -- the press -- dropped all the ifs, and just said that McNamara predicted the war was going to be over, which I did not think was a proper evaluation of his statement. I was not consulted about it; I didn't know he had made it. I just looked at it after it was made and I thought he'd been treated unjustly. Just like I think I've been treated unjustly by saying that we're not going to do the fighting, that the Asians ought to do for themselves. That doesn't mean we're not going to fight; we're going to fight like hell right alongside of them. As I've said time and time again, that we're going to keep our guard up all the way, protecting ourselves every minute. But our hand out trying to get peace. But that doesn't mean that we're going in and run them out and say, South Viet-Nam, we're going to take you over, and we're going to be a colonialist and do all your fighting for you. As long as you'll stand up and do your part, we'll stand right by you. Now that's what I intended to say: that's what I thought I'd said; that's what I believe I said: that's what I meant. And then to have them pick half a sentence out of an extemporaneous speech and say I said that I was going to bring peace to that area. And I ran on a peace campaign. And I was a peacemaker. Of course I want peace. I want peace every hour. But I didn't want it any more in '64 than I did in '68 and I doubt if I wanted it as much.

Q. Was over-optimism a chronic weakness of the U.S. in the 1962-64 period? How about later?

President: No, I don't think it has been. I think that our people like to find a scapegoat and I think they want to go back and take a little report that McNamara made that if everything went along as he had predicted and hoped it would go, that he thought this would be possible. I don't think it's over optimistic. I think it's realistic and I think that if there had been no infiltration and if there had been no change in the government, and there had been no assassination, -- we had to pick up and start all over after that.

Mr. Jorden: Wasn't there a little feeling, though, Mr. President, at least later on, when various recommendations were made, that if we'd just do this or do that, that it will be the thing that will turn the corner or make the difference?

President: Well, I think a lot of people, in support of their recommendation for everything, say, "this is what needs to be done to get the job done." And I think in that respect we always had optimism, and I think you've got to have it. You can't just say you're going to be defeated. If you do, you'll be a victim of your own...

Mr. Jorden: And you end up doing nothing.

President: That's right. Do you feel now that you were getting all the facts with the bark off? I don't think anybody ever deliberately deceived me and I don't think anybody ever presented to me false information. And I don't think anybody ever made a recommendation to me that they did not believe was based on the best facts that they had available and the best judgment that they could make. I have no scapegoats.

Q. Did you find any surprises when you got into the Viet-Nam question after assuming the presidency? What were they?

President: Yes. I was surprised that the personnel out there was not better coordinated and was not working together, and there was as much dissension as there was, between Harkins and the CIA, and the AID people and the Ambassador, and others. And I thought that we made a mistake in removing our Ambassador out there. His name is a German name -- I thought he was a very good man. But he wasn't a Charles River man and he wasn't a fellow who would give up his conviction to satisfy Halberstam.

Mr. Jorden: That was Fritz Nolting?

President: My impression was that he was treated unjustly and unfairly. And my impression was his judgment was good and I thought there was a lot of dissension and when they removed him I tried to start with an entirely new team. I asked CIA to send the best man they could. I had Lodge there and I asked Lodge what he wanted and put in charge and I gave him what he asked for. We brought Harkins out and put Westmoreland in. We told them to get the best man they had -- three of them about the same: Westmoreland, General Johnson, the Chief of Staff, and General Abrams. And they felt that Westmoreland would be the best man for it and that's who we sent.

Q. In retrospect, which of your adviser's counsel was the soundest -- day in and day out -- on Viet-Nam? Whose was the worst?

President: I never did feel like I had any worst. I never did divide it up. I had great respect for Rusk's judgment and his evaluations and his demeanor and his manner of presenting things, and his unselfishness, as I did for McNamara. No one was ever more respected than Rusk was, and no one was ever supported any stronger than McNamara was, at the time they were there. I don't know what worst advice I got, if any.

Q. Did you find any surprises when you got into the Viet-Nam question after assuming the presidency? What were they?

President: I just told you about the personnel. We've completely changed that. I did not realize that we were going to assassinate Diem and I did not -- it was a surprise to me that we had so much difficulty getting a government to replace him. We had the Khanh government, and four or five in between, until we finally got Thieu with some stability. And that was a surprise. Because I believe had Diem lived and directed the thing, that he would have had a force strong enough to have done much better than we did during the period '64-'65.

Q. In 1964 what was your biggest worry about Viet-Nam?

President: That was that we couldn't get a stable government, that we had made a serious mistake in assassinating Diem., or encouraging it or allowing it to be done while we turned our back And I really think we did more than that. And I was constantly fearful that we could not get North Viet Nam to hear us and we could not get the Soviets or the Chinese to do anything to mediate or conciliate and, as a consequence I was very fearful that we would become more involved all along. And from November 1963 really until July 1965 I did everything -- notwithstanding the fact that I had the Tonkin Gulf Resolution that authorized me to take whatever steps necessary to deter aggression -- I did everything I could to avoid taking any steps that would escalate our commitment. But I finally came to the conclusion that all of my advisers reached, namely that we either had to run or to put extra men in to protect them. And I was not prepared - either way I went it was a terrible situation. I knew that if I ran out that I'd be the first American President to ignore our commitments, turn tail and run, and leave our allies in the lurch, after all the commitments Eisenhower had made, and all that SEATO had made, and all that the Congress had made, and all that the Tonkin Gulf said, and all the statements that Kennedy had made, and Bobby Kennedy had made, and that everybody had made, I'd be the first American President to put my tail between my legs and run out because I didn't have the courage to stand up and support a treaty and support the policy of two other Presidents. On the other hand, I didn't want to increase our commitments and I didn t want to escalate them. So the result was that from November '63 until July '65 I did everything I could to avoid the commitment that ultimately I had to make -- either run or stand. And I chose to stand.

Q. You have been accused of misleading the people with statements during the campaign -- "we are not going North", "we are not going to send American boys to do the job of Asian boys," etc. What is your reaction?

President: We may have made a mistake by saying we had no intention, no plans, or no program to invade North Viet-Nam. I was trying to do that to show the Soviets and to show the Chinese and to show the North Vietnamese that we did not want to change the government in North Viet-Nam, that we just wanted to deter aggression in South Viet-Nam, and that we were not going North. And I never had any intention of doing it. I had a suggestion that we invade North, and normally when you're at war, you do whatever you need to do to win the war. And we were charged with a no-win policy by a lot of our critics because we really said we were not going North and were not going to invade them. But we planned to do that to deter them and to assuage them and to keep them from gobbling up South Viet-Nam out of fear that if they didn't, we were going to destroy them. I meant to say, the policy that I adopted in my own mind all the way through was a balanced policy. We had no designs on changing their government. We had no desire to overrun their country. We had no desire to make them a puppet or satellite of ours. We just did not want them to come in to South Viet-Nam and take over this little nation by force of arms. And we felt like that we had a general commitment in the world to resist aggression, as we resisted in Europe and we were resisting it there. And we did everything we could to talk them out of aggression. And to talk the Soviets and the Chinese and everyone else out of supporting them. And we tried to do it by assuring them that we were not going to invade the North and we also tried to assure them that we weren't going to come in there and just make war on them by ourselves; we weren't going to do the fighting that the Asians ought to do to protect themselves. But that didn't mean we weren't going to fight and support them.

Mr. Jorden: Well, I think what some people did was just deliberately take out of context what you said and when the bombing of the North started, they related it to your statement that we weren't going to go North. What you were talking about was an invasion of North Viet-Nam.

President: That's right.

Q. Were you seriously concerned about Goldwater's using nuclear weapons in Viet-Nam if he were elected?

President: At the time I thought that the Senator was speaking rather dangerously. As I have evaluated the construction placed upon his remarks, I think perhaps that he may have had his remarks misconstrued and overstated, although they were pretty strong and stronger than I would have made or did make. But I think also that he was the victim of unjust criticism, particularly by the media and perhaps by the Democrats I think that he was strong and tough and he felt that before he would yield any of our sovereignty and give up our way of life and have us conquered that he would do anything, as nearly anybody else would. But I don't think that he really had any intentions of dropping any nuclear weapons to win South Viet Nam, although that was the implication. I was concerned about some of his statements.

Q. The possibility of a Congressional resolution was discussed in 1964 before the Tonkin Gulf. Why was it never introduced?

President: Because we never were face to face with the reality of putting in troops. I advised President Eisenhower on the Formosa and Middle East Resolutions that he ought to get a commitment -- not a declaration of war -- but a commitment of the Congress that if he had to go in, to have the Congress go in with him. And I took the position from the first day I was President until the last day I was President that I never wanted to go in and make any commitments of troops and men and bodies without the Congress going in with me. And I told my advisers, namely Mr. Rusk and Mr. McNamara, on many occasions in '63 and '64 and '65 that I didn't want to go in at all, commit troops and make policy and have men killed unless I did so with the knowledge and with the consent of the Congress. That did not mean that they ought to declare war on North Viet-Nam because North Viet-Nam might have a treaty with China or Russia that would immediately be kicked off by a declaration. But that we ought to have, as I recommended to Eisenhower, as leader of the Senate, the other party, in the Middle East and Formosa. And for them not to come back and make a recommendation to me that we commit troops and that we engage in acts of warfare with North Viet-Nam without the knowledge of the Congress and without the permission of the Congress. And I asked them to go and take the two resolutions that we had acted upon for Eisenhower and copy them word for word just substituting the name, and be sure we have adequate authority, and use that as an example, and go and get that through the Congress, which they did. And they had hearings, and I told them at the time to be sure the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Foreign Relations Committee were not the only ones consulted -- that the Armed Services and Appropriations, too, and try to ask them to meet jointly, which they did. And the so-called Southeast

Asia Resolution which Fulbright mis-named the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, and got the Times to call it that, and everybody called it the Tonkin Gulf when it was really called the Southeast Asia. And they put another label on it for their own propaganda purposes. But when they brought me this resolution I asked that they go and have full hearings in both places, full discussion in both places and insist on a roll call in both places. And insist that they make it abundantly clear that under this resolution the President is being authorized to take whatever action may be necessary -- atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, anything else -- to deter aggression. And I got that resolution in August. And I had the authority in my hip pocket from August until really July before I escalated the war and really acted in mass on that resolution. Because I was hoping every day, every week, every month that these aggressors, and those supporting them, namely Russia and China, would not be hell bent for leather and for gobbling up South Viet-Nam -- that they could be deterred, they could be talked out, they could be discouraged. But they escalated; they didn't play it down; they stepped it up all the time, til finally it got to the point where the military strategists said you've either got to run and get out and save what you've got, or you've got to get in.

So, when the firing started, we responded, but it was obvious to us without a resolution, the Tonkin Gulf, it was obvious to us we would have to -- if we're going to have incidents of this kind, we'd better be armed with that power. That was when you really had to face up to it, in August '64.

Q. Are you convinced the Tonkin Gulf attacks were as serious as they looked at the time? Was the response justified?

President: All the information I had was that they were serious, and I felt at the time and I feel now if I were confronted with an identical situation tomorrow, I would respond the same way.

Q. After the fact, it appears that your announcement of the retaliatory strikes was made before the attacks were completed. Didn't McNamara and CINCPAC mislead you on this?

President: I don't think so. I think that the position we took was this: the acts of provocation had occurred and we were going to respond. But it was going to be a limited response and we did not want either Russia or China, particularly China, to think that because planes were going in that direction there might be an attack on them, and that it was going to be

an all-out nuclear war of some kind. And we were very anxious to make the announcement of the limited nature of it, and it just being a response to an attack, so the Chinese wouldn't be mis-led by it, wouldn't be mis-guided by it, wouldn't misinterpret it, and wouldn't get in themselves. And we held up the announcement for some time, at the request of McNamara, until he was sure the planes were on the way. But we wanted to announce as soon as they could detect them, as nearly as we could, the same time they could detect them., the nature of the attack, so that it wouldn't be mistaken by the Chinese. That's my memory of it.

Mr. Jorden: Well, I think that there was... after the fact, some people checked back and looked through the exchanges of messages with the ships and so on, and while the planes took off, some of them, at least, were circling the ship -- not going into target for some reason or other, and it looked from these messages that CINCPAC thought the attack had started but it hadn't actually started, and it was four or five hours later...

President: We were very anxious that the moment we had our people in the air where the Chinese could know that they were in the air -- their radar would show it.

Mr. Jorden: I don't think that's ever been clearly explained, in public.

President: That's it. As I remember it -- McNamara is a better authority on it -- but I remember I called him a time or two and said: can't I go on and make the announcement? I want to be damn sure that China is not at war with us, when they don't understand this thing. No, we've got to be sure, and first we thought they'd gone and then they weren't sure, and CINCPAC was going to inform him, and they told him they'd be gone in 30 minutes or 40 minutes, and there was a delay - as there invariably is on every attack -- there's always delay -- something comes up and you've got to change this or change that. You've got to be sure and so forth. A lot of messages went back and forth. But finally McNamara said, "Now they're off." And you can go and make it. And maybe some of them were off. But what we were trying to do was to say to China, really, in effect: We're not going to give you enough word that you can kill these men -- the Americans who were making the attack. We're not going to endanger their lives. We're going to give you enough information that you won't endanger the world by mis-interpreting what we're doing. That is my memory of it.

Q. Why was there so much pressure to make the announcement so fast? Would 12 more hours have made a difference?

President: Well, we think the Chinese would have reacted spontaneously, just when our planes took off. They could have said, hell, here they're going to make an attack on us and we're going to respond. And they would have been misled.

Q. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was very strong. Why do you think Fulbright and others backed it? Why did they then try to walk away from it?

President: I don't know. It was very clear. There was no deception. Senator Cooper, the Senator from Wisconsin, Nelson, and others raised questions about whether this involved, whether under this resolution a President could start a land war in Asia and could commit troops to it. And Fulbright said sure, he could -- he hoped he wouldn't. Course, we hoped it wouldn't. But he certainly could. He knew what he was voting for, and anybody who is capable of being a United States Senator and had the qualifications to be and had the comprehension to be, and no question he could read that resolution and see what it says, and know what he's voting for. Now to try to come along and run out on his own commitments, to say he didn't understand it and didn't know... you can't read the record and do that. Because they asked him the question: if under this resolution the President couldn't commit force. And Morse took the position that you could. And Gruening took the position that you could, and they were very proper, and if I had felt like either Gruening or Morse, I'd have voted just like they did -- against the resolution. And anybody that didn't agree with what we were doing, and what our view was, namely that we ought to deter aggression, ought to have voted against the resolution as Morse and Gruening did. But for a fellow to vote for the resolution, and say I'll go in with you, and then start and get up there, and a firecracker to break in his face and him cut and run -- that's not a man that excites my admiration. And it's hard for me to conceive that men can do it. And then, for them to just say that they misunderstood is no excuse. Now why they walked away from it, I think, is because it was easier to walk away than to stand.

Q. How do you regard the main Senatorial critics of our Viet-Nam policy and the reasons for their opposition -- Fulbright, Gore, Pell, Church, Aiken, McGovern, McCarthy, Morse, Mansfield?

President: I think Morse basically and instinctively and sincerely felt that this was a commitment that should not be made, that we should not escalate matters out there. We ought to retreat, we ought to move back, and we ought to yield. And I think that same position was felt by Gruening. that we had no business out there. As Fulbright and Walter Lippmann

later said, "These are not our kind of people." And I think they genuinely felt that. I think that McCarthy and McGovern and Church and Pell and Fulbright later felt that we just oughtn't to be there and they'd made a mistake voting for it, those that did. And they had hoped that we could pass a resolution, and that was all that was necessary to fight the war. But when the resolution didn't suffice, they didn't want to do much more.

Mr. Jorden: Morse voted for the SEATO Treaty.

President: Yes, but he had some grave doubts about it, and he felt that the United Nations ought to be doing that instead of SEATO.

Mr. Jorden: He raised a lot of questions about that.

President: Yes, yes, he did. And I think he was sorry he voted for it. And I think he tried to put a different interpretation on it than what we have. I don't know that we've put the right one. I always thought we have. I believe we had. And I believe that Dulles and Eisenhower in proposing it said that we ought to do here what we did not do in Europe -- serve notice on Hitler in advance that aggression would be met and would be deterred. And Mansfield, as I recall, in the debate said -- I was not there in the debate, but I read it -- that the time may come when this policy we're laying down in Manila, namely that we warned any would-be aggressor that he'll have to meet us in unison and in force, and in unity, if he moves, that if we had done that at Chamberlin's meeting, we might have avoided the holocaust. And if we do it in advance we might avoid it. But if we are unable to avoid it, then we'll have to stand. That's what Mansfield said, and that's what I interpreted it, and that's what I thought we had. But he's never been willing to do that. But I think they thought this treaty and this paper would do it, like they thought the resolution would do it, and then when it didn't do it, they don't want to pay the price.

Q. What convinced you to retaliate against the Pleiku attack of February 1964 with an air strike?

President: I felt that if they could come in while our men were sleeping in their barracks and hit them, that we ought to have a response to it. And I think we ought to serve notice that they could not kill Americans with immunity, without having to pay the price.

Q. Did Mac Bundy's presence in Saigon and his strong reaction affect the decision?

President: Yes, I'm sure that it affected it. I don't say it influenced it, or that it wouldn't have been made without it. But I think that the fact that all the circumstances contributed to it. But I think that if a man comes up here and starts killing my children that I have custody over, that I'm responsible for, I'm going to respond.

Q. Were you by that time convinced that regular air strikes against North Viet-Nam should be undertaken?

President: No.

Q. If not, when did you decide? What influenced your decision most?

President: I think that the general feeling among my advisers was that we would lose less lives and we would render greater cost to the enemy by air strikes and we would deter him more that way at a cheaper cost than any other method available to us. And I think that was the basis of air strikes.

Q. Did any of your principal advisers oppose bombing as a regular program?

President: Yes, I think that Ball was pretty consistent all along in minimizing the results that could be obtained from bombing. And I think he generally felt that we incurred a greater risk than we obtained results from bombing. I don't think anybody else felt that way. I never felt Goldberg was a strategy adviser at all. I just felt he presented our policy at the United Nations. But I think Ball genuinely felt that because of experiences he had had during the war. He thought that bombing was greatly overrated.

Q. How effective did you think bombing would be, and what would it accomplish?

President: I felt that it would make them pay a great price, that they would be unwilling to pay over a long period of time. And I thought that it would show them our determination to resist and would convince them that there was nothing to gain by prolonging the war. I didn't ever think that it would bring them to their knees and insure victory. I never thought at any time and no one ever advised me that it would stop infiltration and that bombing itself, alone, would result in military victory.

Mr. Jorden: Did you think it would encourage them to negotiate?

President: Hopefully, yes. Yes, I thought it would. I thought that if we could seriously affect their POL supplies, and we could make it much more difficult for this infiltration to succeed that they'd look at their hole card and say, well, what's the use, maybe we ought to try to work out some agreement, have an election, let the best man win.

Q. What is your current estimate of the bombing campaign?

President: I think some of the people who advocated it, Senator Goldwater and others, I think they claimed for it results which were never anticipated and which were never received. My estimate of it is that it was not as effective as its most arch advocates felt it would, and not as bad as the people who wanted to stop it all the time thought it was.

Q. Would there have been peace talks in 1965-67 if there had been no bombing?

President: I don't think so. I think that that's been answered pretty good. There might have been talks but I don't think there would have been any results, even after all... weak as they were, and I think they really were since last August, probably August '67, they've been going downhill. But I don't think there have been any productive talks and I think we've stopped it enough to see it. And I think it's always been a false alarm that they put in the hand of their propaganda experts. And our folks were naive, and took them and said stop the bombing. Martin Luther King: stop the bombing. Well, we've stopped it now. We stopped practically all of it in March and we stopped all of it in October. And we haven't made any progress in the year since then. And I think the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Q. Why did you stop bombing in May? What influence did Bobby Kennedy have on that decision?

President: I believe that this was the first bombing pause five or six days. I never was convinced, Wheeler was not convinced, and originally Rusk was not convinced -- that the Soviet Ambassador who suggested to us that it would be good to stop and that we might get somewhere. That it would bring any results. But Wheeler felt that if we stopped it and resumed it promptly after we showed that they wouldn't come immediately, that there would be no great danger to American lives and there might be some

chance of their doing it. At least he would defend me from a military standpoint. And we would take no really great military gambles if we didn't let it to on too long, and would not sacrifice much military position if we didn't let it go on too long. And Bobby Kennedy came down to my little room and proposed two propositions to me: that I make Bill Moyers Secretary of State to succeed Dean Rusk. I asked him if he really believed that, and was really serious, and he said yes.

Mr. Jorden: In 1965?

President: Yes. And he was very anxious for me to remove Rusk in '63 and '64, and his whole life was dedicated to removing Rusk, and electing himself President. During all that period -- this wasn't a new thing of his -- I think he seriously considered whether he would let me be President, whether he should really take the position the Vice President didn't automatically move in. I thought that was on his mind every time I saw him the first few days, after I had already taken the oath. I think he was seriously calculating what steps to take. For several days he really kept me out of the President's office. I operated from the Executive Office Building because it was not made available to me. It was quite a problem. But he recommended Bill Moyers for Secretary of State and I just couldn't believe he was serious and I wondered if there was something wrong with his thinking processes, and I looked at him and asked him if he was really serious. Oh, yes, he was serious. He went ahead then to tell me not so much Moyer's qualifications, but all of Rusk's disqualifications, and what a terrible State Department, how terrible everybody over there was. And I said: but these are the people President Kennedy selected, and he had put them all in there, and President Kennedy had confidence in them. And I said I can't understand your feeling this way. Well, he said he was going to get rid of all of them. And I said, well, anyway, I'm not going to change Rusk. Bill Moyers is here and he can help me, and I like Bill Moyers, but I'm not about to remove Rusk.

Then he proposed the bombing. And I told him we had given a lot of consideration to that. I talked to him, and listened to him, and he said we could try it for 24 hours, 48 hours, 72 hours -- it wouldn't hurt a thing in the world. And I said well, I think we could, for a very limited period. And I have it under advisement now, and I'm going to talk to General Wheeler, and I'll give serious consideration to it. And he did influence it. I was anxious to have his cooperation, his support. And I didn't do it just for that. It was one of many voices that contributed to it.

And I have said that it was really Bobby Kennedy's pause. But in my own mind I had doubts about what would come from it. But once I felt I would not yield any military ground, I would not suffer any great damage, I didn't think it would hurt me to stop it for a few hours, which we did.

Mr. Jorden: But he wasn't the first one who suggested the idea?

President: No, it was pretty general. North Viet-Nam was the first one. It's been a North Viet-Nam proposal all along -- stop the bombing, stop the bombing, and we'll talk. It is just as much of their propaganda and their psychological warfare, stop the bombing, as to move your troops home. They've had two things: stop the bombing and get all and completely out, give it all up to us, yield everything, and then we'll have peace.

Q. Why did McNamara later change his mind about bombings? Did it surprise you?

President: I don't know. I don't know why McNamara... I don't know what thought processes McNamara had. I feel that McNamara was very able; he's very genuine, he's very sincere, he's very loyal, and very much on top of his job, and I thought gave too much to it. I was real concerned about his health when he went to the World Bank. But I thought he was surrounded by a good many people that I did not trust. And I had fears of it, but I never had any fears of him. But I had great questions about a lot of the people he had in there. I don't want to get into personalities, but Warnke is a sample, and Yarmolinsky is a sample, McNaughton was a sample. I thought all of them were pretty soft.

Mr. Jorden: Dick Stedman? Dick Stedman was another one.

President: Yes. And Evan... what's the name.... not Evinrude, but... the computer man?

Mr. Jorden: Oh, I know who you mean, Mr. President -- Enthoven.

President: Yes, Enthoven.

Q. Did your estimate of the bombing campaign change as it went along? In what way?

President: No change that I'm aware of.

Q. On troops, was it a mistake not to send in large forces in 1961 or 1962? Might not decisive action earlier have produced a different result?

President: Yes, I think it would have, and I think it was a mistake. And I think it was a mistake to think that we could handle it like we did Laos. And I think maybe Laos will turn out to be a mistake.

Q. Was our commitment of forces begun in 1961 done too gradually? Was it too gradual after 1965?

President: No, I believe we furnished them all the men they could take as quick as they could take them. My general instruction to Westmoreland was: whatever you need we'll give you. And I told the American people I thought when I increased the 100,000 that we were going to send 100,000 out and were sending whatever else was necessary.

Mr. Jorden: He had a big problem, of course, of developing a logistics base before he could absorb too many forces.

Q. Did we commit too many forces in V-N? Or not enough? If so, what was the right level?

President: I gave my men what they said they needed, and I'm not an expert on it.

Q. What influenced most your decision to increase forces and assign them to combat missions in 1965?

President: Because I thought we either had to run out or run in -- that it had reached the desperate point, that we had tried everything available to us to get to the peace table, to avoid this, from November '63 to '65. And we had not succeeded. And we either had to run in or run out.

Q. What were the factors that led to your deciding on the long bombing pause (December 1965 - January 1966)?

President: Dobrynin came in and told us if we could have a 12-day pause or not over 20 days at the most, that he thought we could get talks started leading to peace. And I had great doubts. And then finally they convinced McNamara. Then they had Bundy out and convinced him, Dobrynin did. Bundy first, I think, and then McNamara. And then they finally convinced Rusk.

Mr. Jorden: They did convince Rusk?

President: And then Rusk called me on the phone and told me he thought it was worth it. He didn't know that anything could come from it, but he was willing to go along with them. McNamara and Bundy had sold him. I still held out. And then I went to Washington and I went to see Wheeler, and Wheeler said he didn't think it would get any results but he'd be willing to try. If I wanted to try, he'd defend me. And I got Max Taylor, and Max Taylor said the same thing. Their advice was better than anybody else's -- Wheeler's and Max Taylor's. But I finally decided that we'd reached a time where I could do it without endangering lives, without adversely affecting our military position.

(Tape ends here.)