INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: KEYES BEECH

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: The Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2

G: [When did you] become acquainted with the Vietnam scene?

B: In March 1954. I was living in Japan, and the Korean War had ended, and I began to hear and read about this place called Dien Bien Phu, and so I went down there for the Chicago Daily News to cover that war, what turned out to be the end of it. I was there at the time that Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh and at the time of the Geneva Accords. That was my introduction to Vietnam--my first mistake.

G: Your first mistake? Why do you say that?

B: Well, I did not know, of course, I had no idea that it was going to take all that much time, that I was going to devote so many years of my life to that place. I was in and out of there. I was in Hanoi during the last days, during the seizure of Dien Bien Phu, I'd commute between there and Tokyo, my home, and then I was in and out after the French surrender. In effect, I was in and out of Vietnam during the fifties, and then in the early sixties, I began to spend more and more time there--

(Interruption)

--and you can take it from there.

G: All right, sir. Did you know Bernard Fall at the time?

B: No, I did not. I am one of the few correspondents who did not know Bernard Fall. I have read him, but somehow our paths never crossed. That was one of the more interesting coincidences, that it didn't happen.

G: Did you cover the activities or the mission taken on by the Americans after Dien Bien Phu when General O'Daniel I believe had charge of the refugee program there, did he not?

B: Well, I was just trying to recall what Iron Mike O'Daniel's role was there. Of course, at that time we had General [T. J. H.] Trapnell instead of the MAAG, I believe, but Mike was there as a sort of--well, he must have had a specific role. I really should know. This sounds a little bit ridiculous, but I do remember seeing a lot of him. I had known him first in Korea during the Korean War when he had the 3rd Division, I believe, there. Mike was a fighter, of course, and he was a very good one. But Vietnam was not quite his cup of tea. I remember him telling me one day--we were having lunch--about how sensitive the French were, how proud they were, and he said, "You have got to be awfully careful dealing with the French." And he said, "I can understand why they're sensitive, but I don't know what they've got to be so proud of."

(Laughter)

He said, "I've got to be a diplomat. I shouldn't be talking to a reporter about these things." Of course, I never quoted him on these things. It would have gotten him into trouble; it would have created a diplomatic incident. And there were times when Mike would say,

"What we're going to do, Beech, we're going to organize four divisions. We're going to get a lot of tanks. We're going to start rolling north." Well, I was no expert on Vietnam, and I don't consider myself one today either, for that matter, but I said, "Well, I don't think that it's going to work out just that way. I think the French have already lost this war." Mike was a very determined man, but unfortunately he didn't make any difference. It was too late for that sort of thing.

G: He got Ed Lansdale, I believe, to come over, didn't he, from the Philippines?

B: You know, I don't really know whether he did or not. If he did, I was unaware of it, although it is very possible that he did. Certainly he had a lot of influence there. Shall I tell you about Lansdale now?

G: Sure.

B: I did not know Ed in the Philippines when he was operating there except I might have met him. I knew his work, but I didn't know the man. It wasn't until 1955, I think thereabouts, that I got to know Ed pretty well, and he came over there in 1954, of course. He and his boys were the Saigon military medical group or something like that.

G: Military Mission.

B: Military Mission, as they called themselves. They were doing a little last minute sabotage effort up north before the Viet Minh came in to take over. A lot of it, in retrospect, was sort of schoolboy stuff, you know, like putting sand or something like that in all of the oil that was supposed to go into the tanks of all the buses and things

like that. And what difference it was going to make in the final outcome, I wasn't entirely clear, but anyway, they were doing things up there. Then I knew Ed principally in his role as an adviser and confidant of Ngo Dinh Diem. I used to go to Ed's house on Rue Pasteur, I believe it was, quite often. He had lots of parties out there, and Madame Nhu would be there, and her husband [Ngo Dinh Nhu] would be there. It was sort of the place to be, you know; it was where the action was.

Then it was in 1955 that Diem had his finest hour, and that was when he cracked down on the Binh Xuyen. They'd lobbed some mortars into his front yard at the palace, and he had to do something or else throw in the towel, so he did something, and to his great surprise, there was one battalion that was loyal to them, and they went up and beat the hell out of the Binh Xuyen. During that whole thing, why, a Cao Dai general--that was one of the religious sects, as you know--[was killed], General Trinh Minh The. I was having dinner with Lansdale that evening at his house and the phone rang, and a voice said, "They just got General The." Some of the riverboat pirates, who were Bien Xuyen people, had shot him as he was going over a bridge over the Saigon River into the port area. Ed said, "Oh, well"--after he sat down--"that's too bad. Trinh Minh The was a good man. He was moderate, he was a pretty good general, he was on our side, and he cost twenty-five thousand dollars."

(Laughter)

I've told that story a number of times since, and Lansdale says he remembers everything except the twenty-five thousand dollars.

G: I heard it was closer to three million.

B: (Laughter) I don't know. I don't know. Maybe Ed knows.

G: Well, twenty-five thousand is not too much to pay for a good general.

B: Well, you know, in those days--that was 1955--twenty-five thousand dollars was twenty-five thousand dollars. That was a lot of money, of course.

G: He got Lansdale into hot water with the French, didn't he?

B: Yes, I guess he did, but I don't know enough about that to talk about it. I do know that I had a clean beat on the story, because I was there when Lansdale got the word, and then after I had filed, I went down and I told Abe Rosenthal, who just happened to be in town--he had come over from New Delhi. The man who was normally in Saigon had gone away to the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, and Abe had moved in there to fill in. He and John Roderick of the AP were both there at the Continental Hotel and so I told them about it, and they got very excited about it.

(Interruption)

G: Are you going to stop with that?

B: Yes.

G: Okay. Do you remember any of the other people on Colonel Lansdale's team? I'm thinking of--Lou Conein was on and off, I believe.

G: Yes. Well, Lou, of course, I knew. I didn't know Lou so well at that time. I knew him very well later on when we had our war there. As

you know, he's here in Washington now with the DEA, I assume he's still there. As I say, I knew Lou quite well. I knew Bohannon. I don't know what his name is.

G: Oh, I don't think I've got his name either. [Charles Bohannon]

B: Bo. I knew Rufe Phillips. Yes, I knew him. I didn't know [Ray] Wittmayer. I don't think I knew these other people that are mentioned here.

G: Do you remember what Rufus Phillips was doing? I had heard that he was accompanying the ARVN out into the countryside when they were re-establishing the governmental presence in the wake of the Viet Minh pulling out.

B: Well, as I recall, Rufe Phillips was sort of their rural affairs expert. He came back later in that role, too, but I don't recall too much about what he actually did except that, as I recall, it had a good deal to do with land tenure, but I'm not sure enough of myself to really comment on that.

While we're on the subject of Ed Lansdale, well, I consider him a very good friend, and I hope it's mutual. But, you know, back in the sixties when they brought Lansdale back out there as head of this special team to win the war, I happened to hear about this early on, and I had read a piece in Foreign Affairs magazine that Lansdale had done. There was something, it seemed to me, wrong with this piece because Lansdale was very critical of the war effort, and justly so, the way we were fighting the war, but it was very plain to me at that time that the Vietnam that Lansdale was writing about no longer

existed. Everything had gotten big; they had gotten organized. So when I heard that Lansdale was coming back out there as head of a special team, my personal reaction was, "This is not going to work very well, because everything's organized, and Ed Lansdale is a broken-field runner."

I was having a drink with the then-CIA station chief--

G: This would have been in what, 1965 or so?

B: Well, about that, maybe a little bit later, 1966 or thereabouts. 1966, 1967--I think probably 1966 would be close to it. Anyway, I was having a drink with this fellow one evening, and I said, "What do you think of Ed Lansdale coming back out here?" Well, he damn near dropped his martini. I will never forget that. I had assumed that he knew. Well, he didn't know. He swallowed, and then he immediately ordered another martini. (Laughter) And I said, "Well, I thought that you knew everything." I was very pleased with myself. He said, "When is he coming? When is he getting here? Who is he going to work for?" I said, "Well, you're supposed to--you have these immense intelligence resources at your command." You know, I was rubbing it in.

G: Who was this, do you remember?

B: Let's call him Georgie.

G: Okay.

B: Yes. We first met in Hanoi, but I didn't know who he worked for then. A nice guy. In any event, he said, "You know, I used to work for that broken-field runner." I said, "Yes, I know you did. That's why I

assumed that you knew that he was coming back out here." Well, I could see what was going through his mind right away. He was throwing up the barricades to protect his turf, and that's what everyone was doing out there at that time. There was a great deal of empire-building or turf-building or so forth.

But what happened to Lansdale and his team--and he had some good people. He had a Boston lawyer, a Choate man, Choate and Yale, whom I met on the plane coming down from Hong Kong, who was telling me what a great opportunity he felt that he had to perform a public service in Vietnam and that he had a letter of introduction from the Boston bar association to the president of the Saigon bar assocation. And I was thinking to myself, "Jesus Christ! This is going to be very, very interesting." But he was going to be their lawyer; he was going to keep them out of trouble. But he was a nice fellow. He didn't stay very long, I don't think, but--

G: It's hard to know how a lawyer could have kept Ed Lansdale's crew out of trouble.

B: (Laughter) I don't know. In any event, of course, the rest is history. There just wasn't really that much that Lansdale and his people could do.

G: The war had passed him by, is that--?

B: In effect, yes. I think I wrote a story about it at the time. I was sad. You know, if you've been around a war--this is a terrible thing to say, and I'll probably launch another antiwar movement for saying it, but wars, you know, sometimes have their good side. There's a

certain romance attached to war as long as you don't get killed or maimed or something like that, but one of the great characteristics of the Vietnam War was always missing--there was nothing funny about it.

G: No humor.

B: No humor came out of that war. It is the first war--well, certainly the first war in modern times that we've had, in which there was no humor. No humor. That was its chief characteristic of the war--except very black humor. You know, you had no Bill Mauldin. You had no Ernie Pyle. There were a couple of old World War II correspondents who had been pretty well known during World War II who came out there and tried to do it all over again in Vietnam. They fell flat on their faces.

G: Did you know Jim Lucas?

B: Yes, I knew Jim quite well.

G: Were you thinking about him, perhaps?

B: Jim was in the Marine Corps doing the same thing that I was doing. Jim, yes, Jim's thinking, political thinking, stopped, I think, along about World War II. And I was thinking about another man who is now dead, Dick Tregaskis, who wrote one of the first bestsellers of World War I--World War II, excuse me. Even I did not cover World War I. I was born the year before it started. But in any event, Tregaskis wrote a book called Guadalcanal Diary--it was about the marines in the Solomons--and it was exactly that, a diary, and it was quite good. It had all the words in there and everything like that, and it was an immense bestseller, but Dick came out there to try to do a Vietnam

diary and it just didn't work. It wasn't that kind of a war. And Dick never understood that war and it was sad to see--

I don't know, here I am, I was approximately the same age. I think perhaps the reason that I understood this war was because I went to Asia when I was still a young man not long out of the Marine Corps, and I went out there and I kept--I went out for a year's tour of duty, and I stayed thirty. So I was moving all the time; I was always discovering something new. Whereas my colleagues from World War II had come back to the States and gone about their business, living a fairly sedate life, but I was constantly moving around from this situation to that situation, so I was forced to keep abreast of what was going on. If I bridged the two wars, that was the way it happened.

G: Did you know Graham Greene?

B: No, I did not, and I regret that because he is a man who has always interested me very much. I was in Saigon when his book came out. I remember that. I think it was in 1956, and nobody was talking--nobody in the American colony there, the American community, excuse me--was talking about anything else, and it was an under-the-counter item. I don't know whether it was officially banned or not.

I'll tell you a funny story about it though. Another friend of mine, a CIA station chief who came out there--I had known him in Korea before, he's now dead. His name's Peer de Silva. He was a West Pointer, a very, very good man, by the way, and Peer came down there on very short notice to replace Jocko [John] Richardson after the coup against Diem. Peer said, "Meet me for a cup of coffee" one day, and I

said, "Where?" And he said, "La Pagode," and I thought that was an interesting place, so I met him at La Pagode. We had our cup of coffee. I said, "Do you know the history of this place?" He said, "No." I said, "Do you remember that scene in The Quiet American where the big bomb goes off and kills everybody?" I said, "This was it." He said, "Let's not meet here anymore."

(Laughter)

G: Well, that's kind of ironic in view of what happened to him later, I think.

B: Yes, precisely, it is, because he got pretty badly chopped up in that bombing of the Embassy. I was in Taipei when that happened, and I took the next plane to Saigon. I called a friend. I heard that de Silva was a casualty, and they said that he was going to be all right. They weren't sure about whether his eyesight was going to be saved or not. Well, actually, it was. He did lose the sight of one eye, and it finished him off as a career CIA officer, really. He went over to Bangkok after he recovered and became the [inaudible] head of the embassy, counterinsurgency expert there. But he never fully recovered from that, psychologically. It does something to a person.

G: What were they saying about The Quiet American?

B: A dreadful book! Dreadful, anti-American, and all that sort of thing. I think that insofar as capturing--the book was anti-American, for that matter. I knew--well, I never met Greene, he had come and gone by the time I was there, but the characters in this book I knew. Lansdale was supposed to have been the quiet American, of course. I

never saw him quiet. He wasn't very quiet. He was a rather noisy fellow sometimes. But I believe there is an Indian correspondent in there, and I knew him quite well. Another character was the Reuters' man who didn't want to go back to that greasy flat in London. That was Dennis Corley Smith, who was the Reuters bureau chief there at the time, and Dennis did not like the portrayal of him very much, I'm afraid. The Indian came off looking very well. He was a peace-loving fellow.

Someone told me, and I don't know whether this is true or not, that Greene wrote that book primarily to get even with the Americans for refusing him a visa. Now I'm not sure that he was refused a visa although I think he probably was considered a subversive type.

But to go back to my original point, and I do digress, the point is that Greene is such a tremendously skillful writer that he captured the mood of Saigon during that time, the mood, and that's the important thing. The politics of it became sort of irrelevant. I have always felt that Graham Greene had or has a very strong death wish, because there's a death wish running through most of his books, if you look back on it, and I think it runs through The Quiet American, too. But despite the anti-American tone of the book and everything like that, I thought that as a novel it was a darn good novel.

G: A good read.

B: A good read as they say, yes.

G: What about Francois Sully? Was he around then?

B: Oh, I first met Sully in--I'm glad you brought him up--I first met Sully in Hanoi in 1954, and he was not long out of the French army. He had been a sergeant, as I recall, in the French army; he was an enlisted man in the French army. And he was the Time stringer, the Time-Life stringer, up there. Sully was a very gay fellow. I don't mean to use that word gay in quotation marks. I mean he was a wonderful fellow, and he liked girls and all that, but he was a blithe spirit, perhaps would be a better word. He was trying to write his story, and his English wasn't terribly good, so he came to me one day to ask my help, and his English was so fractured that it was easier for me to sit down and rewrite his story, without changing anything, than it was to just simply correct his English. So Sully was always grateful to me. He never forgot that, and in later years in Saigon, when he was working for Newsweek this time, Sully was very helpful to me on many occasions.

Of course, Sully, the war sort of ran over him, too, because it used to be said--you remember, you may recall that Sully was expelled from Vietnam by the Diem regime at one point for something he wrote that was offensive to the family. I guess Madame Nhu is the one who put the finger on him, but anyway, he was a Newsweek stringer at that point. Well, he gets expelled. Immediately Newsweek comes to the support of their man, and they put him on staff and sent him to Harvard.

(Laughter)

G: Polish him up a little.

B: Yes, polish him up, yes. Polish up his English and so forth.

G: Well, he had two rewrites then. You gave him a rewrite, and then Time-Life gave him a rewrite whenever that got there, I guess.

B: Yes, I suppose, yes.

G: I heard that he was expelled for the caption that appeared under a photograph that accompanied one of his articles, and he didn't write the caption.

B: That's very possible although I don't really recall what he was expelled for.

G: Well, you said that he was helpful to you. Did he have good contacts, good sources?

B: In certain respects. He knew some of the Vietnamese generals and so forth. I wouldn't say that he was a major source or anything like that, but he knew his way around, how to get to people and so forth, and he was good company. I always enjoyed Sully.

One thing that bothered him, of course, was that they were always sending in a new bureau chief who didn't know anything about Vietnam. Sully understandably felt that he knew a lot more than the bureau chief, and he didn't like that, which is understandable. But it was also understandable why Newsweek was sending in an American to be bureau chief, so--

G: They wanted someone with--

B: Nobody could win that one. Certainly Sully couldn't win it.

G: What was Saigon like in those days in the middle fifties?

B: Well, somnolent is the word that occurs to me. It was a very sleepy sort of place. When the French were still there in force, when the French military was still there, it was a very lively place, but the city still hadn't been spoiled because there weren't really enough troops in Saigon at one time to spoil the place. There were still some marvelous restaurants. There was L'Amiral, Guillaume Tell, La Cigale, which was also a nightclub, more than a nightclub, it was a restaurant. There was one place called The Bodega, which was really a splendid restaurant.

G: Could you spell that? I'm not sure my--

B: Bodega, B-O-D-E-G-A, which I believe in Spanish means bar.

G: It means warehouse.

B: Does it?

G: Yes.

B: Well, that shows how good my Spanish is, doesn't it? But it was right in downtown Saigon across from that little park. I'm trying to remember the name of that street. They changed the street names there so much that I--I knew the French names, and then I had to learn all the Vietnamese names.

But anyway, what it was like? It was peaceful, pleasant, except for an occasional thing like when they shot up the town when Diem put down the Binh Xuyen in 1955, but generally it was very quiet.

G: How were relations with the French in the days after 1954 when they hadn't pulled out yet and so on?

B: Well, you mean relations between the Americans and the French?

G: Yes.

B: Well, during that transitional period I suppose that--I may do some people in the American embassy an injustice here, but it seemed to me that we continued to be quite pro-French. You may recall, General [Paul] Ely came out at that time. He struck me as being quite a good man, by the way, he and Cogny, General Rene Cogny, who was later killed in a plane crash in Malta or someplace. But anyway, as military men I thought that they were very good.

I remember--perhaps this sums it up pretty well--there was a French correspondent I knew quite well, I had known in Korea first, and his name was Paul Mousset. He lived in Paris, but he represented a group of provincial newspapers. Paul was a very sophisticated man; he had gone to Harvard, among other places. We were having an apéritif in the Continental one day, and he said, "You know, it's all very well for you Americans to be anti-French if you wish. You may even malign us, if you wish. But just remember this. When the night of the long knives comes, all white men look alike." And I said, "Not if they're wearing blue jeans."

(Laughter)

Mousset. Paul said, "Maybe you've got a point." Well, you know the irony, the great irony of this was that years later there were an awful lot of Frenchmen who were wearing blue jeans.

G: Yes.

B: But they were the popular people with the Vietnamese, of course.

G: Lansdale I think has reported that he had a good deal of trouble with the French, that they didn't like him.

B: Oh, no! Well, that was to be expected because the French did not--they resented us. I remember this goes back to Hanoi days. They resented the American press there. Nobody likes to have--no army likes to be seen losing a war, and they knew they were losing. And of course, I don't think that the Americans wrote nearly so savage stories about them as the French correspondents wrote. But we were the foreigners. It was one thing for the French journalists to write what they wrote, but it was quite another to have these Americans doing it. I remember in Hanoi one day when Don Wilson of Life magazine became so exasperated with Captain de Lassuz, who was the French information officer--he came from a long line of generals, and he hated correspondents very plainly, and he took no trouble to conceal that. Don got so enraged one day, over censorship or something like that, that he grabbed Lassuz by both shoulders and started shaking him just like this, and Lassuz as I recall, never raised a hand, never broke this ramrod posture of his, just stood there and permitted this "ugly American"--a Yale man, by the way, Wilson is--to shake him until Wilson finally gave up in despair and walked away. (Laughter)

G: That's marvelous.

B: That story more or less reflects the mood of Hanoi in 1954.

G: We were beneath contempt, is that the--?

B: Well, no. I'll tell you who hated everybody--the French Foreign Legionnaires, who were mostly German, and they all seemed to be

nineteen, or eighteen, nineteen to twenty. Marguerite Higgins and I, who'd covered the Korean War together, were there in Hanoi at one time together, and there was a bar across from the Hotel Metropole where we used to go, and the legionnaires used to come in there, and we would sit there and buy them pink champagne and listen to their war stories. These young Germans, they really had what might be called a Gotterdammerung complex. They had nothing but contempt for the French in whose legion they were fighting, of course, because they had defeated the French. They had nothing but contempt for the Vietnamese simply because they were these funny little colored people. And as for the Americans, I think that they had sort of a contempt for us, too, because they knew we weren't going to do anything, and, of course, they also knew that had it not been for us, they probably would have won the war. That was a nice--

G: Meaning World War II?

B: Yes. World War II. We must keep our wars straight here, mustn't we? Yes.

G: One military man has described those legionnaires to me as the finest-looking set of scoundrels you've ever encountered. Is that an accurate description?

B: I would say that they were very good, yes.

At the time I was there, the only real combat that was going on, that was worth missing, was Dien Bien Phu, and I did not go into Dien Bien Phu. I flew over it, we got shot at, and all that.

G: What kind of aircraft were you in?

B: It was an old C-47. And this was very interesting, as a matter of fact. If you were a correspondent and you wanted to do something there in Hanoi, you had to put your name in a book and what you wanted to do, which meant that everybody else knew what you were going to do, unless, of course, you could--there were ways around this. But I had asked several times to fly over Dien Bien Phu and I had been refused, so one day I went by and I wrote it down again, wrote it down in the book, and I guess they decided, "Well, they'll get that so-and-so." They'd let me fly over Dien Bien Phu and hope for the best. Well, Marvin Stone, who was then with INS and who is now editor of U.S. News & World Report, he saw my name in there--he was there for INS or Hearst--and he said, "Gee, if Beech is going to go, I got to go, too, or else I'll get a rocket from the New York Journal American"--or at least that's what I think he was thinking--and Jim Lucas.

So the three of us made this flight, and we were carrying a--we were in this old C-47, which was the French command plane for the parachute drop at midnight over Dien Bien Phu, and there was a French colonel sitting up in the cockpit. At one point as we had gotten near Dien Bien Phu, something happened. The plane started to climb sort of hand-over-hand. I never saw an old C-47 go up at such a precipitous angle. And after we'd leveled off again--we had been going along at about ten thousand feet, as I recall, and suddenly we were at fifteen thousand feet, and later I asked the colonel what had happened. He said, "Well, the Viet Minh shot down one of our planes that was

flying at ten thousand, and I felt that we should go up." And I said, "Well, that was certainly a wise decision on your part." (Laughter)

When you got to Dien Bien Phu you didn't need anybody to tell you that you were there because it was literally ringed by fire, fires you could see down there. And that night--the perimeter was so small, the defense perimeter was so small at that time, that some of the people who were jumping landed in enemy territory outside the perimeter, and some of them landed right on top of the control tower down there. It was that close.

G: Those guys were all volunteers jumping in there, weren't they?

B: Well, I don't know whether they were all volunteers or not. But another aspect of this--I went one night--I used to go to a nightclub there, a nightclub and bar called El Rancho. There was a restaurant. It was in two parts. La Bonne Casserole was the restaurant and downstairs in the basement, as I recall, there was this nightclub called El Rancho, where you had a Frenchman in blue jeans with a red bandana singing "She'll be coming around the mountain" in French.

G: That must have been something to hear.

B: Yes. Lucien Bodard, a very good French correspondent, and I used to go in there, and Lucien knew everybody. He was really--Lucien looked like a French foreign correspondent ought to look. He was tall, brooding. He always had a Gauloise [?] cigarette drooping from his lips. The ash was always about this long, and it--

G: Or twice as long.

B: Yes, and it always fell off on his clean white shirt. And Lucien looked at his watch, he said--some French ladies came in, three or four of them as a group, and the place was packed with legionnaires, officers, and Frenchmen and women and so forth. And there was a Czech lieutenant, a Foreign Legion lieutenant, standing over in one corner, a very dashing-looking fellow, and Bodard said, "Watch that Czech over there. Watch him go for that French woman there." And sure enough, he circled around like a shark for a few moments, and then he zeroed in on this French lady, and pretty soon all of them were seated at a table and they were carrying on a highly animated conversation. And Bodard said, "Their husbands jumped tonight at Dien Bien Phu."

G: Wow!

B: I wrote a little column piece about that one time. It didn't make me any points with the French.

G: No, I can imagine not. That's interesting.

B: That's the kind of war it was.

G: This is an aside. I thought that only Frenchmen could be officers in the Legion. That's apparently not true.

B: Well, now, you have got a point. I am unable to answer that. This man was, according to Lucien, as I recall--I don't mean to hold Lucien responsible for what I am saying--but as I recall he was a Czech, C-Z-E-C-H, Czech.

G: Perhaps he had French citizenship.

B: That's very possible. Very possible.

G: Well, it's a minor point. Did you know the Durdins, Till and Peg Durdin?

B: Yes, very well. I saw them just a few weeks ago as a matter of fact. They are living in La Jolla now [inaudible].

G: I must make a note of that. How about Homer Bigart?

B: Homer I knew in Korea, yes, and I last saw him in--I think I last saw Homer in Vietnam, as a matter of fact.

G: Really?

B: Yes.

G: Hank Lieberman?

B: Yes, I knew Hank in China, in Nanking in 1947. I knew him also in Hong Kong where he was living later after the communists took over China, and I knew Hank in Hanoi. I was paddling around the swimming pool--this was again in 1954--we were paddling around the swimming pool at the Cercle Sportif in Hanoi, and Hank was--Hank always looks like a little teddy bear. He was not such a little teddy bear; [he was] a big, round teddy bear. He was hirsute, in a word. He said, "You know what I'm going to do?" He said, "I'm going to go home to Hong Kong to my wife and children. I'm going to tell the office that I want to go home. I'm tired of being a foreign correspondent." He said, "I'm a family man." And he did it all. He went on back, and that was it.

G: That was his sayonara.

B: Yes.

G: How about John Mecklin?

B: John I knew. I first knew him and he was based in Hong Kong during those days. I went to John's house many times. He's a very nice man.

I knew him in Saigon. We disagreed on a few things. That's always true and makes life more interesting and so forth. Then again I knew him when he was public affairs officer or mission spokesman there during the early part of the war.

G: A very frustrating job, from his account.

B: Oh, it was a murderous job, yes. John wrote a very good book, that Mission in Torment. It was a good book. It was aptly titled, too.

G: Robert Trumbull?

B: Bob Trumbull. Yes, I saw him--Bob is older than I am, and I saw a story of his datelined New Delhi just the other day. Bob is one of those guys who seems to go on forever. He is a wonderful fellow. As a matter of fact, to show you how far back both of us go, I was in Karachi, which was then the capital of Pakistan, back in about 1956, and I was covering a SEATO conference there, and the bearer for my room was a very dignified, handsome-looking man, a blue-eyed Indian. You don't see too many, but there are some. He was very Aryan, in other words. And he saw that I had a typewriter and I was writing all these stories, and one day he said, "Sahib, are you a journalist?" I said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "Do you know Mr. Robert Trumbull?" And I said, "Well, of course I know Mr. Robert Trumbull. He's in Tokyo right now." And he said, "Well, I used to be his house boy in New Delhi, and when partition came and the bloodbath began, Mr. Trumbull saw that I got out and that I got to Pakistan. He saved my life." So. . . .

G: Let's see if we have any other names here. I think that--how about Joe Alsop?

B: Joe I first knew during the Korean War also. We made the Inchon landing together. What a pain in the neck he was.

G: (Laughter) Elaborate on that if you will.

B: Well, I suppose Joe would forgive me. We see each other from time to time here in Washington. Well, Joe, of course, had been in the CBI [China-Burma-India theater]. He worked for [Claire] Chennault, as you know, in the CBI and in China and is quite a remarkable man. We are supposed to be talking about Vietnam here. Anyway, I had known him in Korea, and he had--Maggie Higgins and I were covering the war together, and Higgins was working for the [New York] Herald Tribune, and Joe's showcase home paper was the Herald Tribune, so he attached himself to Maggie, which meant attaching himself to me as well. So we were both stuck with him as it were, and I say that with all good humor.

But Joe and I made the Inchon landing together, and--well, as an old ex-marine, I didn't think it was much of a landing. It was the wrong time of day. We did it in the evening, and there was no beach to storm. There was just a seawall and so forth. Joe said, "Well, what wave are you going in?" And I said, "About the seventh or eighth. I've had my first wave." So we went in about that time, and the coxswain landed us at the wrong place, and it wasn't--not a shot was fired at us. And I said, "Well, I'm going back out to the command ship to file," and there was a boat leaving. And Joe said, "You promised to stay on the beach the first night." I said, "Well, that's

true, but I changed my mind. You're a three-day-a-week man, and I'm a daily man. This is my chance to get out there and file," and so I dashed out. I saw him the next day, and he was walking along the road with the marines with a bit of a swagger, very salty already, and I said, "Want a ride?" He said, "I think I'd prefer to walk." I had promoted a jeep from a marine friend. And later he agreed to ride, and I said, "Joe, what did you do last night?" He said, "Took a sleeping pill and went to sleep."

(Laughter)

But in Vietnam, Joe--Joe has often said that Vietnam ruined his health, his reputation, and his digestion. And of course, I think that Joe Alsop in his way is a great man; I think he's a great American, and he has been gloriously right about many things. But when Joe was wrong, he was also gloriously wrong, and he was very wrong about Vietnam. I think that analyzing Joe as a journalist, or as a columnist, I would say that with Joe you were either 100 per cent for something or 100 per cent against it, and that's the way he seemed to operate. There was no grey area. As a reporter--I was a reporter, not a columnist, although I did write some fairly interpretive stuff from time to time--I was always being bothered by the grey areas. Joe didn't seem to let the grey areas bother him, and he--they'd have a new general, back in the sixties, in Vietnam. We had these revolving-door governments, and one general was in this week and another one the next week, and Joe embraced, figuratively speaking, some of these generals in his columns, about what a fine man this man was. Well, if

it occurred to people later to ask, well, if he was such a fine man, why did he get kicked out three weeks later? I think it was a tragedy. I think that Vietnam was sort of a personal tragedy for a man like Joe Alsop. Of course, it was an even greater tragedy for the people who got killed there.

G: There was a lot of talk about Ngo Dinh Diem being a miracle man back in the middle fifties when he suppressed the sects one after the other and consolidated his position and so on. What was your vantage point for evaluating this miracle?

B: Well, I would certainly never call Diem a miracle man despite the fact that he was a devout Catholic, of course. "No miracle man he," as Time might have said in those days. He had a lot of help, of course, from us, but what achievements were made I think Diem would have to get a good deal of credit for. He made some right moves. But miracle man--miracle man, no. I used to go see Diem. I would ask to see the President, and then the big problem was to get out of there once you got in. He would talk for two hours, three hours, four hours, and the big problem for a correspondent or anyone else who was seeing him was to keep awake, because frequently he would allow fifteen or twenty minutes to go by without any room for translation. Of course, this all had to be translated. That was what was so terribly time-consuming. Everything had to be translated, of course. Unfortunately, no correspondent around there at that time that I knew of spoke Vietnamese, and most of us didn't speak French, or if we did speak French, it was so badly that everything had to be translated

into English. I always tried to stay awake and listen to the man, and I tried to write, to condense what he said and make some sense out of it as it was coming to me because, after all, I had asked to see him, and he assumed that I was sufficiently interested to hear him out. Even though I was bored to distraction, I still felt that I owed it to him. I felt I had brought it on myself.

G: How did you get access to him? Who did you have to go through?

B: Well, it was fairly easy in those days. I would go see--well, first of all, I knew Wolf Ladejinsky, who was his land reform adviser, very well. Wolf was an old friend of mine from Japan days. And Wes Fishel of the University of Michigan I knew quite well although not nearly as well as I knew Wolf. And then Dong Duc Khoi, who was Diem's liaison officer with the foreign press, Khoi was a good friend of mine. At least, I think he was. You never did know about Khoi. He was a friend, I know that, but you never knew about Khoi.

One time--to show you--this may be illustrative of what it was like in those days. This would be in your mid-fifties days. Diem was pretty well consolidated at this time. The big blowup with the Buddhists was to come later and so forth, so these were fairly tranquil days for Vietnam. You could drive practically anywhere in the country you wanted to in those days. I had been up from my usual two or three or four-hour interview with the President, and Khoi and I journeyed to L'Amiral for lunch where we proceeded to have a couple or several drinks to sustain ourselves, and Khoi said, "You've got to get rid of him." And I said, "Well, what do you mean, Khoi?" And he

said, "You've got to get rid of him." I said, "What do you want us to do, kill him?" He said, "I don't care how you do it. Get rid of him. If you want to win this war, you've got to get rid of him." And I said, "Khoi, doesn't it strike you as a little bit odd that you are supposed to be the man who is his liaison with the foreign press, of which I am one, and you're telling me here that we ought to kill him, the President of the country?" He said, "It's too bad. You've got to do it."

Now, Khoi unfortunately himself is dead. Khoi was a very good friend of mine; I came to understand him much better. But Khoi in many ways was typical of your better educated, more thoughtful Vietnamese. I personally knew him when he was the South Vietnamese chargé, I think that's what they called it at the time, in Bangkok, and at that time, Khoi hadn't really made up his mind which side he really belonged on. The real heroes--Ho Chi Minh and [Vo Nguyen] Giap, you know, that conquered Dien Bien Phu and the George Washington of Vietnam and the great independence fighter, they were all on the communist side, and he wasn't at all sure about this government in the south. And what decided Khoi, incidentally, as he later told me, was when Diem showed enough courage and decisiveness to track down the Binh Xuyen in 1955. Khoi then said, "All right. I'll stay with them." But then later he became disillusioned and said we had to get rid of him. And then so after we had our lunch, we went on and probably took a long nap, that being that for that day. Later--well, I think it's coming up on a question here, I can tell you--

G: Go ahead.

B: I think you asked me about--

G: Well, I think the next question in turn was to ask you about the role that the Americans played in helping Diem consolidate himself.

B: Well, of course, we gave him--the simple fact that we were supporting him was in itself a big plus for him, and we were pouring in the aid. There were a lot of people that were very much interested in the aid, of course, and there was the ubiquitous Colonel Lansdale and his team.

G: You bring up an interesting point. There's a story I'm sure you're conversant with that the State Department was, in fact, toying with the idea of deposing Diem and that Lansdale stepped in in the nick of time with a cable saying, "No, no. This would be a terrible mistake. Diem is the man we want," and so on. Are you familiar with that?

B: I think not enough really to discuss it intelligently, but maybe this will help a bit. After Diem cracked down on the Binh Xuyen--that really was a crucial event--I had just come from the Bandung Conference and had stopped off in Saigon in case something happened. I was lucky. Anyway, I remember going over to the American Embassy, and everybody over there was wringing his hands about what a terrible thing Diem had done, and I said, "Well, wait a minute. He shot up the town, that's true, but the Binh Xuyen were, after all, dropping mortars in his front yard. What the hell was he supposed to do?" And they said, "Oh, well, look at all the damages. The whole town is in ruins," which was somewhat of an exaggeration. The House of Mirrors was in ruins.

G: That's the most expensive [brothel]?

B: It was later, yes. It was Diem's closing up the whorehouses and the gambling dens, of course, that helped precipitate the Binh Xuyen revolt. I said, "What do you expect the President of a country to do when some people start shooting mortars at him?" and so forth.

I was not at all impressed with our embassy at that time. I was very much unimpressed with it, with one or two exceptions. I liked Rob McClintock, who was the chargé, who later went to Cambodia and some other places, and another man whose name escapes me at the moment. There were some exceptions, but generally--no, as you probably will recall, General J. Lawton Collins, who had been made a special envoy to South Vietnam, was airborne when Diem cracked down on the Binh Xuyen. This, I think, was probably deliberate on the part of Diem and Nhu and Madame Nhu and so forth. Anyway, as I understand it, Collins was prepared--as a matter of fact when Collins arrived there--yes, this comes into focus now--Collins arrived, and he called a backgrounder for the American press corps. There weren't very many of us, maybe a half dozen, so we all went over to his house, and, as I recall, the thrust of the backgrounder was that "the situation here has got to be reversed. We have got to pick up the pieces after what Diem has done," so it was a very anti-Diem, pro-French line. Well, many of us wrote stories about this. John Roderick of the AP was covering there, and I forget who was there from the New York Times. It could have been Rosenthal, or maybe Till Durdin was back, I'm not sure. In any case, we didn't think much of what Collins had to say.

And apparently, I don't know what moved Dulles, but John Foster Dulles, who was then, of course, the secretary of state, changed his mind, said, "We're going to go with Diem."

G: That was supposed to have been in response to the cable that Lansdale sent out.

B: Yes, well, it's very possible that Lansdale's cable was decisive. After all, Allen Dulles was, of course, the head of the CIA at that time, and so I'm sure that what Lansdale had to say carried a lot of clout. In any event, I think so far as the Saigon press corps was concerned, it was a wise move.

G: Did you have the opportunity to observe any of the programs that the Americans were conducting in Vietnam in the fifties to help Diem consolidate his hold on the country?

B: Well, yes. Well, there was the land reform program, which Wolf Ladejinsky had been called in to help run, and the agrovilles, as they called it, to use the French word. They were only partly successful. Of course, much of the land, particularly around Saigon, went to Catholic settlers from the North--Catholic refugees from the North. This alienated a lot of the South Vietnamese, the native-born South Vietnamese, because they felt that the Catholics were getting a lot because Diem himself was a Catholic president, and I suppose there was some truth in that. Diem trusted the Catholics, and he didn't always trust the others. I think that that was undeniable, although I think he was Vietnamese before he was Catholic. In any event, I do recall that some of the resettlement projects--resettling the refugees was a

big thing, of course, because there were about eight hundred thousand of them who came down south, and I remember they landed at the foot of Rue Catinat, as it was called, right there on the Saigon River, and that thing was terribly botched. Those people sat out there on the dock without any shelter for days in the rain before they were finally taken away to someplace. They did not have a happy time of it, at least at first. Of course, we brought in a lot of tractors there; we were helping to clear land for farming purposes. As to how effective we were generally in that period it is difficult to say. I don't know that we made a great deal of difference in the countryside at that point.

G: You mentioned land reform, and you mentioned Wolf Ladejinsky. Land reform was an issue that just never went away, it seemed like, throughout all those years. What went awry?

B: Well, gosh, that's such a complicated subject, of course. First of all, there never was--well, there was not until it was too late--no, I'll take that back. Let me say that land reform later--land reform was not a panacea, to begin with. There were many of us who thought it was going to achieve a lot more than it did, but it was never really effectively enforced. There never was the kind of land reform that there should have been, at least certainly not during the fifties. Later, during the sixties, the government did quite a lot, but it never seemed to get off the ground. I used to have many long talks with Wolf Ladejinsky about this. Wolf Ladejinsky was a great man, in my opinion. He had his warts like all of us, and I used to tell Wolf,

"Well, you know, if you stay around this government long enough, you're going to get tainted because this is not a very nice government here." He said, "Well, I think I know what I'm doing," and I said, "Well, I hope you do." We had known each other for a good many years and that sort of thing. Of course, eventually Wolf did bail out because he felt he could no longer be effective, but he certainly tried.

G: Excuse me. He had done the land reform program in Japan, had he not?

B: He had a lot to do with the design of it. Wolf Ladejinsky--well, he is a book in himself. He was born in Russia. He got out as a teen-ager during the revolution, got to America and sold papers on the streets of New York and was really one of those terrific Horatio Alger stories. Well, he didn't make a great deal of money, but he did all right. But Wolf was--I wouldn't say that he was responsible for the land reform program in Japan. Prior to that, he had initiated a pilot land reform program in China down south; I think it was in Szechuan Province, I'm not sure about that, but it was in southern China. And Wolf used to speculate on whether or not, if there had been true land reform in China, you would ever have had a communist revolution. Well, if you had had a true land reform, if it had been possible without a bloody revolution, which it was not, then you would not have had the communists in control of China today. But that program in China, that pilot program, was quite successful, but it was too late. In Japan, land reform was something that the Japanese recognized the need for, and of course it worked pretty well there. It was

enormously successful. Ladejinsky had a great deal to do with the concept, with the way things went. He didn't sit down and just draw up the plans, you know, there were a lot of people involved, but let's say that Wolf's presence was always felt.

G: Didn't he do something similar on Taiwan?

B: Yes, he had a lot to do with the program on Taiwan. Yes.

G: But he fell out with Diem, I understand, later.

B: Yes. I don't know whether there was any one thing. I remember one time Wolf arranged for me to go on a trip with Diem down through the Delta. There were a lot of diplomats. Oh, it was a crazy trip; it was really one of the most screwed-up trips that I have ever made. And I wrote a story about it which wasn't very flattering to Diem. Well, Wolf was so furious with me that he wrote me a letter--I was back in Tokyo by this time--he wrote me a letter from Saigon saying he had read my story and he was never going to speak to me again. But, of course, our friendship did survive that.

One morning, Wolf Ladejinsky and Wes Fishel of the University of Michigan--or was it Michigan State?

G: Michigan State.

B: Michigan State, yes, thank you. That was a grievous error there. In any event, the three of us were walking over to the palace; I think we were going to see President Diem or somebody. Wolf said to Fishel, "Isn't it funny, a couple of Russian Jews advising the Catholic President of a Buddhist country? Life is very strange." (Laughter) And I agreed, "Yes, it is very strange."

G: Well, it gives you an idea of the cosmopolitan nature of things.

B: Yes, you see that is what made Vietnam so fascinating. You had all these odd characters there: you had Lansdale; you had Wolf Ladejinsky, who fled the Bolshevik Revolution; you had Wes Fishel, who was the academician out there; all sorts of interesting people.

G: Ladejinsky is dead, I believe, isn't he?

B: Yes. Speaking of that, in 1975, shortly after the fall of Saigon, I was back here in Washington, and one of the first things I learned was that Wolf Ladejinsky was in George Washington University Hospital, which is very near here, and that he was dying. He had been flown directly here from New Delhi, where he had been with the Ford Foundation there, and he had had a massive cerebral hemorrhage, I think, and he lost consciousness in New Delhi. They flew him back here, and he never regained consciousness, but neither did he die. I was around Washington for a couple of weeks. I used to go over to see him and sit there for a couple of hours reading, waiting for--on the chance that Wolf would wake up, you know. And he'd lie there, and they were feeding him intravenously, of course, keeping him alive, and I am sure that if Wolf could have spoken he would have complained about the food. But anyway, he never regained consciousness, and I used to look at him--I used to sit there. It was rather weird, I think, "Wolf, remember when"--you know.

There was a very nice young woman doctor who was serving her internship there, and she looked in the room one day--her name was Paula [inaudible], and she said, "You know, I know that Mr. Ladejinsky

is supposed to be a great man, but can you tell me why he was a great man? I remember reading something a long time ago." And I said, "Sure, I'll tell you. Sit down. Providing you'll show me his case history, the medical history here." She said, "I'm not supposed to do that. The trouble with me is that I care about patients. I'll never be a good doctor." But anyway, so we made a trade, and I told her all I knew about Wolf Ladejinsky.

But Wolf Ladejinsky was a very interesting man. He lived his life in compartments, you know. When he did die finally, you found--among the people who showed up later--that he had made many people think that they were the only people in his life. Now, we had such a relationship. I was one of his best friends, and he loved my children, and he was very fond of my wife, and he used to come to our house for dinner, and all that. And there was a New York Times man, Joe Lelyveld, who was here in Washington at the time. As a matter of fact, it was Joe who told me that Wolf was sick, was over in the hospital here, and Joe said, well, he had known Wolf in India, and there Joe and his wife and his children were Wolf's special people. And then you'd meet somebody else, and they were his special--none of these people, in most cases, these people never even met each other.

G: That's fascinating.

B: Very, very interesting. Very interesting man.

G: Did he marry?

B: He never did. There was a Japanese lady he wanted to marry, and I will not mention her name because she is already married now. This

was all in Japan, and it was a long time ago. But Wolf really wanted to marry her, at least he said he did, and he was very jealous of her. I know that one time my wife and I invited her to dinner, and I called Wolf to invite him to dinner, and he said, "Is she going to be there?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm not coming. Is he going to be there?" (Laughter) And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, I'm not coming anyway." And then he called back later and said, "I'll come." So he had some other things on his mind besides land reform, sometimes.

G: You said that he left when he felt he could no longer be effective. What--?

B: Well, precisely what it was, if there was a single incident that caused Ladejinsky to leave Saigon, to quit Diem, I don't know what it was. I may have known at one time. Wolf perhaps told me, but it doesn't stick in my mind, really. I do know that when Diem began to get in trouble he sent Ladejinsky a cablegram asking him to come back.

G: He asked Lansdale to come back, too, I think.

B: He did?

G: Yes.

B: Well, I'm sure he did. He was turning to people whom he could trust, Americans that he could trust. These other people he didn't know about, of course. But Wolf didn't come back. I don't know whether he made a trip over there or not, but anyway, he did not come back.

G: Did you have much opportunity to observe the military assistance we were giving the South Vietnamese, the training of the army, and so on?

B: Yes, I observed it, but I didn't pay any great, special attention to it.

G: One of the charges that was frequently heard back in the sixties was that we had spent an awful lot of time training the ARVN for the wrong war. Was that a current charge, or was that Monday-morning quarterbacking?

B: Well, I suppose there was a bit of--well, I think it was a lot of Monday-morning quarterbacking because, you know, eventually we wound up in Vietnam fighting the kind of war that we were training them to fight, that is, a big unit war. But certainly, at the beginning, there was certainly no big unit war. And I would say that you had to have both; you had to be prepared to fight both a small unit and a large unit war. Certainly in the early years, in the late fifties and the very early sixties, it was a very small unit affair, and indeed, I always felt, and so did some other people I knew whose opinions I respected, that a good field police force could have handled the thing better than the army could have. Because essentially, I think in retrospect that it should have been a police action, really. It was finding out who these guys were and who the Viet Cong were, and rooting them out.

G: How would you rate the operation and the effectiveness of the U.S. country team in the middle and late fifties? You could talk about ambassadors or programs or--

B: Yes. Gosh!

G: Maybe if I give you some names--

B: I need some names here.

G: Okay. How about Edmund Gullion? Did you know him?

B: Well, I knew--no, I didn't know Ed. I think we met in Saigon. I knew him a little bit later, but back in the States. I do know him, and he knows me, but I can't say that--I'm trying to think when he was there.

G: He was there very early.

B: Yes, I know. Then there was [Elbridge] Durbrow.

G: Well, let's see. Donald Heath, I think.

B: Well, Heath. I thought he was terribly ineffectual. He was there at the time I first went down there. It was in 1954 at the time of--I thought that Heath was a nice man, but I thought he was totally unaware of what was going on in the country.

G: Well, you mentioned J. Lawton Collins.

B: I think that--well, I frankly did not have a very high opinion of him as a special envoy. I'm sure he was an excellent general, but I just--I suppose he was doing what he was told to do, but I was not terribly impressed.

G: Frederick Reinhardt?

B: Fred Reinhardt, I thought, was a good ambassador. He was there during a rather uneventful period, but I thought he was a good man.

G: How about Elbridge Durbrow?

B: I liked Derby. He used to--one thing I liked about him, he was sort of fun, you know. He had these Sunday afternoon concerts over at the Embassy residence, you know. He'd round up some people who--he liked to play--I forget what he played, the saxophone, or he played one of

the heavy pieces, and so forth--and they would have these music fests over there, jazz sessions, and so forth. I don't know if that contributed anything to putting down the communist threat, but certainly, it sort of relieved the--made it a little livelier around town. But I don't know that--I think that he did a good job as an ambassador, well, at least so far as I know, he did.

G: I was thinking there were some reports of friction between he and Diem and General Sam Williams in a sort of a triangular relationship. I wondered if you had any insights into that?

B: Well, I think that's very possibly true, but I never--I would be surprised if there weren't friction, if there hadn't been friction, but I can't recall anything.

G: Why would you have been surprised if there hadn't been friction?

B: Well, there was always friction. There was always friction between the embassy and the American military, at one time or another. After all, the military wants to get on with it, and the ambassador says, "Over my dead body will you do this," and so forth, "Remember who is in charge here," and so forth. Well, very often they think differently. And Williams, from my recollection of him, wasn't the most diplomatic fellow in the world and so on, and I could see how his manner would put some people off.

G: Do you remember Ambassador Nolting, Fritz Nolting?

B: Yes, I remember Nolting. I think Fritz Nolting was a gentleman. I think that in many ways he got a rather bad break. I guess it was

1961. Would it have been 1961 when Lyndon Johnson--yes, I think it was--when Lyndon Johnson visited Vietnam as vice president?

G: Yes, in the spring.

B: Yes. I remember that visit very well. I remember there were a lot of Washington correspondents, some of whom I knew, who accompanied Johnson out there, and the first question some of them asked me at the airport was, "Is it safe?" (Laughter) And I said, "Well, I think so. Yes, I think you should be safe." But one of my principal recollections of that visit was that Fritz Nolting was giving a dinner for Vice President Johnson at the Majestic Hotel, and the Vietnamese took all the visiting correspondents down to the My Canh floating restaurant there in Saigon.

G: Would you spell that one?

B: M-Y, new word, C-A-N-H. It later got bombed.

G: Oh, yes, okay.

B: Yes, the one that was blown up back in the sixties, and it was one of the favorite dining places and so forth. Anyway, all the correspondents were down there except for me. I was up in the Hotel Majestic bar adjoining the dining room having a drink, and a man came out, an American, and looked at me, and said, "Are you Keyes Beech?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, the Vice President wants to see you." Well, what had happened was, Johnson had gotten nervous about where his correspondents were, see, and he wanted them there, and the Vietnamese had stolen them away from him and were wining them and dining them down on the floating restaurant in the Saigon River.

Johnson didn't want to let them out of his sight. This man who came out and got me was Horace Busby, and he took me in. Nolting was sitting next to the Vice President, as was his place, of course, and Johnson said, "Move over." (Laughter) He didn't say please, either. So Nolting moved over, and Johnson sat me down, and he said, "How are they treating you, boy?" (Laughter) He was looking at the Ambassador, and I said, "Oh, I think everything is all right," you know. "How is the war going?" "Well, not much is going on." There wasn't much going on in those days. The next day, I think it was the next day, he gave a lunch at the Caravelle. You probably have heard about that celebrated lunch.

G: No, please tell us.

B: Well, it was on the ninth floor of the Caravelle Hotel, and Johnson made a speech. Madame Nhu was writing notes, suggestions, you know. She was pretty good in English; she was a good linguist. And as you know, Johnson always had a great regard for pretty ladies and so forth, and Madame Nhu was pretty and coquettish. Anyway, she was writing notes, suggestions of what the President might incorporate in his speech. Whether he actually used any of her suggestions, I don't recall, I don't know. But I do know that he called Ngo Dinh Diem the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia. I'm sure you have heard about that, and I think that nobody was more surprised at that description than Ngo Dinh Diem. He was unaware up until that time that he was the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia.

But you know, Johnson had a much better understanding of the situation there at that time than a lot of people ever gave him credit for, I think. But that's another story. There was also the story which I'm sure you've heard, and stop me if you have, about the day when Johnson was riding out to Bien Hoa.

G: Go ahead.

B: Well, the way I heard the story--and I was not exactly present--Johnson said, "Stop the car! Stop the motorcade!" They were driving out to Bien Hoa on this new highway, which the Americans had built, of course, and Johnson jumped out of that car and he went striding over to this Vietnamese old lady alongside the road and said, "You know who built this?" And she said, "No, I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" (Laughter)

And, of course, the story--I've heard the story so many times it's almost a cliche now.

G: Who did you have it from, do you remember?

B: I don't know. I think some of the Washington correspondents were with him and overheard it. I suppose it's possible that they made it up, too. It has been known to happen. But it's become part of the Johnson legend now, and whether it happened or not, it should have because it was Johnson, at least as he was viewed by some people.

G: Did you stay with him during that brief visit?

B: No. I just covered him in Saigon. I think I stayed on there and let him go on to wherever he was going.

G: We heard a lot about waste and graft and inefficiency and misuse of aid in the late fifties, and I'm thinking particularly of a couple of articles that a man named Colgrove [?] did which stirred up a hornet's nest in the Senate. Do you remember the circumstances of that?

B: Yes, I remember those Colgrove stories. I had not heard of Mr. Colgrove until that time. And I remember seeing some of the stories; I think my office sent me these stories and said, "What about this?" or words to that effect, which was a legitimate thing for them to do. I don't recall the specifics of the stories, but I don't doubt that most of the stories were true. There certainly was a lot of graft and corruption.

I would like to make a general observation about graft and corruption in Asia with specific reference to Vietnam, and I've done a number of studies, and I've read studies by sociologists and political scientists and others on this subject. To begin with, the Vietnamese were no more corrupt, and no less, than other peoples of Southeast Asia.

G: Let me interrupt you. We're almost at the end of this tape. Let me run this--

Tape 2 of 2

B: Okay. As I was about to say, I would like to make some general observations about graft and corruption, and specifically in Vietnam. To begin with, the Vietnamese were no more corrupt and no less corrupt, and perhaps even a little less corrupt, than some of their Southeast Asian neighbors. Corruption in the early days, in the days

of the mandarins, was generally limited to the stratosphere, as it were, in the bureaucracy. Let's say a wealthy merchant wanted a special favor, which only the mandarin could grant. This meant that this man, by making this request, was upsetting the harmony, the flow of things. This is very Chinese, very Confucian in a way. Therefore, the mandarin was in a position to grant this, but he must have a little reward for having to interrupt the flow, because the waters flow around this rock or over this one or something like that. That's the way it worked in the old days.

Now, with the coming of the French colonialists, of course, you had--the French themselves were not--their reputation as colonialists was--in many respects they did a very good job, but they were not the most honest of all colonialists. I remember the governor of North Vietnam once saying, "If we had to be colonized, it's too bad it could not have been by the English. At least, they knew when to leave." When we came in there with all this money and spending it as though it were going out of fashion, to coin a phrase, obviously, there was a great deal more money to be corrupt with, so everybody became more corrupt, until finally it permeated all strata of society. It got to the point where if a war widow wanted to collect her pension, when she went to the clerk in the local ward office or wherever she had to go, she expected to pay something to the clerk, but it was a question of how much. This often became the point.

Now, I remember one time my cook, Minh--Little Minh, we called him. He was a marvelous man. He had eight children, but he was

called up by the local draft board one day and told that he was going to be drafted because it seems they didn't have any record of all these children at the ward office where he said he registered them. He came home in a terrible state, and they wanted fifteen thousand piasters, and--

G: To discover his children?

B: To discover his children, yes. And Minh was saying he'd have to sell his Vespa, his motorscooter, to get that much money. Well, I said, "Well, I'll take care of that, Minh." Well, he said, "Let me go back." Now he had expected to pay them a bribe, but he said, "I'll have to go back. I'll have to talk to them again." He beat them down to ten thousand.

(Laughter)

Later on, I was talking, I was telling this story to Sam Berger, a very good friend of mine who was the deputy ambassador and whose widow lives right here in Washington right now, and Sam was very angry with me. He said, "You should"--he was chairman of the anti-corrupt practices committee of the American mission there, which--ho, ho, ho, very amusing, yes. As if the American embassy was going to stop corruption in Vietnam. And Sam said, "That's encouraging just the sort of thing that we're trying to prevent. Why didn't you tell me? I would have done something." I said, "Yes, you know, Sam, it crossed my mind to call you. But I decided not to because I knew that if I called you and you intervened in this case, that would be the surest way of having something happen to my cook. Quite apart from that,

he's a nice man. He's a damn good cook, and I want to keep him. That would have really been the kiss of death." I called Vietnamese friends to try to get him out of it, but I would never have called the American embassy. And my Vietnamese friends said, "Uh-uh, no, sir."

G: You were interfering with something [inaudible].

B: No, this was something that they didn't want any part of. I was interfering in domestic affairs and so forth. Well, I did interfere to the extent that I paid his ten thousand dollar [piaster] bribe.

G: What was the equivalent of ten thousand piasters, or ten thousand P's, as we called it?

B: Oh, gee whiz! Ten thousand P's at that time?

G: About when--this couldn't have been before--

B: This would have been in the late 1960s.

G: Yes, it couldn't have been before 1967 or so because I don't think Mr. Berger was there before then.

B: No, it would have been in 1968 or 1969. I think it was right around 1969, and I was just--now, it depends on whether you want to use the official rate or the unofficial or black market.

G: Now, you see, I wasn't going to bring that up, but since you have--

B: There was a big difference. I'll tell you, there was such a big difference that I must confess that I was dishonest about that, I'm afraid. I used the same Indian moneychanger from the time I arrived in Saigon in 1954 until the very end. He was a good man, had his shop next to the Majestic Hotel.

But what was ten thousand piasters in those days? I ought to remember. I bought enough of them.

G: Officially, I would say it was probably something under a hundred dollars.

B: No, let's see. I think it would have been more than that. I'm not quite sure. I think it would have amounted to around a hundred dollars. I think it would have amounted to that at the time, yes. In other words, it was not much money, but it was a lot of money to him, of course.

On this business of corruption, you know. Once, when Ky, Nguyen Cao Ky, was prime minister, I was doing a piece for the Reader's Digest on Ky, and we were talking about corruption and he said, "Yes, there is a lot of it." And I said, "What about all these corrupt province chiefs out here?" He said, "I know who's corrupt out there." And he said, "But you know, sometimes it's better to have a corrupt province chief than no province chief at all. If I would try to remove so-and-so, this whole house of cards could come tumbling down on me, because this guy has friends in I Corps or in III Corps or IV Corps. I've got to, in effect, preside over--I've got to hold the thing together, because that's what being prime minister of this country is about in a way."

And there was another factor that was generating noise [?]. What we viewed as graft and corruption and so forth and what so many correspondents wrote about with such great moral indignation was not considered graft and corruption in Vietnamese society. A province

chief or a district chief, first of all, was supposed to look after his family, and, of course, this was the kind of--you probably know, the biggest unit in South Vietnamese society actually was the family. If a province chief did not look after his aging parents and his nieces and his nephews and so forth, then he would have been derelict, he would have been considered derelict in his duty towards his family. Now, where a province chief was so predatory and so greedy that he extracted money from the people in his province to a point where it hurt, then that was considered a bad province chief. That man was a bad province chief. Far better that he not tax them or get money from them at all, but at least--it depended on degree to a large extent. But it was so easy, of course, to write about these stories, and then so many of them were true. There were so many stories about the generals' wives, and General [Dang Van] Quang's wife, who was supposed to have collected her take from all the brothels in the Delta. I don't know whether that story was true or not, but I think it was true. I couldn't have proved it in court, but I had so many different reports from so many people, Americans and Vietnamese, that if it wasn't true, it might as well have been because that was the perception.

G: That's an interesting topic. Who got out rich in Vietnam?

B: Well, some people who we thought were very rich turned out not to have too much. Now, take General Quang, old, fat Quang, you know. He was one of the more--I forget his first name now, but Quang, we'll just call him that. Quang--he worked over in the palace for Thieu. Thieu

once remarked he kept an eye on Quang; he really kept him over at the palace just because he could keep his eye on him over there. But I saw Quang aboard ship after we evacuated Saigon, and he told me how he had gotten all of his family out months before because he had seen this coming. (Laughter) He had a daughter in Canada and so forth, and he had another daughter in Paris and a son in Australia and so forth and so on. Well, Quang was supposed to have been a very rich man, but the last I heard of Quang, at one point--this was several years ago--he had gone to Canada, and they tried to deport him, and at one point there he was washing cars in a carwash. Now, I don't know whether--I never went up there and saw him washing cars, but that's what I heard from a usually reliable source, so it was either that Quang wasn't quite as rich as he was--if that story was true, maybe he had a lot of money stashed away that he had not been able to get to, I don't know. But it seems he wasn't as rich as he was supposed to be.

Now, one of the guys, Cao Van Vien, who was the chief of staff and who lives, I think, in Vienna, Virginia, I understand that he is quite rich. I haven't seen him since he came here.

G: How about Madame Nhu? There were charges that she had socked away a lot.

B: Well, I'll tell you, if she did sock away a lot, I don't know where it is, because friends of mine who have seen her in the last few years--of course, she's a dreadfully unhappy woman. She doesn't live luxuriously, if she has a lot of money. I doubt if she has.

G: I hear she's in Italy, is that right?

B: Well, she was living in a villa outside Rome, I understand. I've not seen her there. I haven't seen her since the Saigon days.

G: How about Ky?

B: Well, Ky's running a liquor store out in Los Angeles, and I have never bothered to check up on how rich he is. I don't know if he's very rich, I mean rich in our terms, you know. I know a couple of Vietnamese who were friends of mine who came out of there with a lot of money. Certainly, they were doing well in business. They were smart businessmen and so forth.

G: Bui Diem is running a delicatessen around here somewhere, I heard.

B: I beg your pardon. His wife is running it. Bui Diem is a scholar and a gentleman, you know. He would never touch it. He bought a Jewish deli here in Washington. (Laughter) No, Bui Diem, he's a very charming, a very talented man, you know. He was ambassador here, and he was probably the ablest diplomat that they ever had, and a very clever fellow and so forth. No, I called Bui Diem a few months ago about something, and the lady at the other end said, "He's gone to the bank." So when he called me back, I said, "You must be making a lot of money. You've just come from the bank, huh?" He says, "Oh, no, I have nothing to do with the restaurant. It's something--my wife takes care of all that," you know, and so forth.

G: Tran Van Don has or had a restaurant.

B: He had a restaurant here called Le Frigate, which was the name of the restaurant in Nha Trang, which was quite famous as a seafood restaurant, and he had the cook from Le Frigate, but it never did go over.

It was up here near the Washington Hilton Hotel on Connecticut, or just off Connecticut, but it never did take off.

G: We'll cut it off here.

B: Okay.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

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