INTERVIEW II

DATE: May 30, 1983

INTERVIEWEE: KEYES BEECH

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

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

Tape 1 of 2

B: Yes. There was an example of that, where an ambassador was not fully in control, in Laos, in Vientiane in the early sixties. The ambassador there at that time was a man named Horace Smith, and he had a station chief named Henry Heckscher [?], and they disagreed very strongly. They both were very strong-minded men. I hope I have the details here right, but memory--I would preface everything I say here that memory is very treacherous and frequently self-serving. But as I recall, Horace Smith told me later that he and Heckscher fought a running battle for about a year to fifteen months before he could get control of the situation. Heckscher was running one kind of policy, CIA policy, for Laos, and he, Horace Smith, was trying to run another one for the State Department. Now, that doesn't necessarily fit into--the way I've phrased it here, and the way you phrased it in this question, Smith was by no means dead. He was a very tough guy himself; he was an operator. When he was in Greece, I think he was DCM there, he taught Queen Frederika karate. (Laughter) She was quite good, he said. I don't know.

But anyway, that was a situation where there was a conflict of interests, but more specifically, I was trying to think of a. . . .

G: Well, let me prompt you a little, if it works. This specific clash, now, we know that the CIA, by 1961 at least, was starting what was called the secret war in Laos. Was that involved in the conflict between the State [Department] and the CIA?

B: Yes, it was. I'm not sure how much of a conflict it was, however. I know that the CIA was very gung ho about pushing the war, and so forth. Gosh, I wish my memory was a little bit better on that particular time period.

G: Well, let's go to Saigon, then. Almost contemporaneously, other sources have said that there was a conflict between the MAAG chief and the ambassador. Let's use some examples. General Sam Williams and Elbridge Durbrow, I think, were the two, and that this conflict used to rise up in the country mission councils pretty openly.

B: Yes. Well, to be honest with you, I wouldn't be able to--I'm not competent in that area, because I was not resident in Saigon. I was in and out of there, but I was never there long enough to really get deeply into the intramural fighting that might have gone on. I know that we had--at one point in Saigon, well, very often in Saigon, regardless of who was the ambassador, the man that most of the Vietnamese were interested in was the head of the AID mission, because he had the goodies to hand out. And they were always trying to do an end run around the ambassador, or his DCM, or his deputy ambassador, to get things out of AID.

G: Would this be in order not to have to give anything in return?

B: Well, this would be--yes. Well, first of all, AID had the goodies, they had the money, and also not to give anything in return, if they could help it. Now, I remember--maybe I mentioned this before, I was talking about Sam Berger, who was deputy ambassador when [Ellsworth] Bunker was ambassador there, and Sam was a very tough, very feisty little guy. I remember a dinner party at his house, and after the ladies had gone from the room and the men were sitting around over the brandy, there were two or three cabinet ministers there, and Sam turned on these guys. "I have a few things to tell you," he said jovially. "We are not--unless the GVN starts bringing more rice out of the Delta, we are going to cut off your rice shipments from the United States. How do you like that? Huh? Yeah."

(Laughter)

Well, they didn't like it very much, but they all smiled and said, "Ah, yes. We ought to do something about that, yes." And Sam said, "Another thing. We're not going to set up a PX for GVN bureaucrats. We did it for the army, but we're not going to do it for you guys. Now get that through your heads," and so forth. And I really must say that I knew Sam Berger was a tough--I'd known him a long time, I knew he was tough, but boy, he really was tough.

But still, that doesn't answer your question.

G: No, I just wondered what you had in mind when you made the statement.

B: Well, I had a lot of things in mind. I think the man who inspired that comment was Graham Martin, when he was ambassador to Thailand, and he ran a very, very tight ship indeed. I think it was he who

impressed upon me the absolute importance of an ambassador being in command at all times.

G: Let me ask you to jump ahead with that. Now, Graham Martin came to Saigon in the later years. Were you covering things at that time?

B: Well, I had left Vietnam; I had left Saigon. I'd moved up to Hong Kong. But I kept coming back, and I saw Martin. As a matter of fact, he used to invite me to stay with him from time to time. I always politely declined that honor.

(Laughter)

G: You were trying to maintain your independence or--?

B: Well, it's just I thought it was a dangerous thing to do, and besides, if you're the guest of somebody, you're sort of a captive of the household, and so forth. No, I felt it would prejudice me, and I didn't want even the appearance of impropriety. Because Graham Martin and I had been pretty good friends when he was ambassador to Bangkok. When he came to Saigon, we found ourselves almost polarized in disagreement. I remember asking him one day, "How are you getting along with the press?" He said, "Screw 'em." (Laughter) No, to be more precise, he said "Fuck 'em." (Laughter) And I said, "Well, you know, not all of them are communists, Graham."

(Laughter)

He said, "Well, maybe not. But the rest of them are dupes," and so forth. Graham was a very salty man, very Byzantine, a Byzantine man, too. A very strange man. He's down in Winston-Salem, North Carolina,

as you know. Somebody talked to him at Christmas on the phone; he said his emphysema is so bad that it's difficult for him to talk.

G: It was bothering him even in Saigon, wasn't it?

B: Yes. Yes. Well, toward those last few months there, he was a very sick man; when he came aboard ship after the evacuation he was a very sick man them. It's surprising that he lasted through that whole thing. Anyway--

G: I was wondering how the ship he ran in Bangkok compared with the ship he ran in Saigon in the later years.

B: Well, he couldn't. He ran the tight ship in Bangkok. He made a mistake; he could not run it in Vietnam.

G: Why not?

B: Well, he had some independent people. People could see things coming apart around there. For example, there were certain correspondents. He said, "One guy I'm not getting along with is your friend George McArthur," meaning McArthur of the Los Angeles Times. And I said, "What's the matter? George is a good, solid man." "Oh, he's been writing a lot of stories." I said, "Well, what sort of stories?" I knew what sort of stories; George had run on to some big brass deals, how the Vietnamese were stealing brass and selling it, scrap and all that sort of business, the usual stuff that went on there and around there. And George was doing a darned good job. Well, the stories didn't reflect very well on the whole situation there, and Martin didn't like them. It wasn't a question of them being true, whether they were true or not. They were true, or George wouldn't

have written them, and he had them pretty well nailed down. But Martin was like a guy--he reminded me--he was spending more time, it seemed to me at this one point, trying to plug up leaks in the embassy or military than he was trying to cope with the situation, or at least almost as much. But most of the people who were around him, he had them completely cowed.

But one man he didn't have cowed was a man named Alan Carter, who was a public affairs officer. Alan Carter was, shall I say, controversial, even in USIS. There were a lot of people who did not care for Alan Carter. Alan Carter was the unofficial leak; he was leaking all over the place toward the end days there. At one point, Martin barred him from all the mission council meetings, as I recall.

G: Now, this is the man who succeeded Barry Zorthian?

B: Yes.

G: That makes it a little tough for him to do his job, doesn't it?

B: Yes. Yes. Well, I had first known Alan Carter in New Delhi, and he seemed to be a pretty able guy. He worked for Ken Galbraith there.

G: That's another parallel, I think, isn't it? Didn't Zorthian come from India, too?

B: Yes, but they were completely different kinds of people. Zorthian was very skillful at getting along with people and so forth. Alan I don't think was very skillful at getting along with people. I would not wish to speak ill of him, and nothing to be against him, but he was--well, anyway. Carter leaked. Some of the CIA guys were leaking, like Frank Snepp.

G: That later became a gusher, I think, didn't it?

B: Yes, that's right. So it was impossible for Martin to control the situation there.

I'm drifting way away from your specific question--

G: No, you're not. That's fine.

B: But Martin--you know, he'd been reading [Alexander] Solzhenitsyn at this point. And as I say, I was living in Hong Kong at this time. But I used to go back to Saigon from time to time to help out the guy who had replaced me, who was a very bright young fellow named Larry Green. I would talk to Martin, and I think that what he was trying to do was to turn the whole--he was trying to turn the American public opinion around on Vietnam in 1975.

G: An insurmountable task.

B: Yes. But I think he was really trying. I think he was really trying to do something like that. It seems incredible now. I have a compassion for Graham Martin today, and I have had it for some time, that compassion. But I had very little compassion for him at the time we were evacuating Saigon. That was quite another story.

G: Well, that's good. Before we start talking about 1975, which is something I want to come to at some point in time, one of the questions that arises when we go back and try to put Vietnam in perspective is to try to see the origins of the insurgency in the late fifties or so, and the authorities don't even agree on when it got started or who was involved. What was your opinion at the time?

B: Well, you know, I looked at that question this morning. I thought that's really a tough one. I can remember back in the fifties when it was possible to drive all over South Vietnam, and I traveled all over South Vietnam with Ngo Dinh Diem and with Wolf Ladejinsky--he was the land reform man, as you recall. And the only sign you saw in those days, this was the late fifties, you'd see a Viet Cong flag flying, attached to a kite, flying somewhere down in the Delta. And it would be on a long string--obviously it had to be on a long string--and you'd see that, that flag. Some little guy in black pajamas out there had run up this kite with this flag on it. In those days occasionally you would see--oh, I think at that time you began to see trees felled across the road at times, just to let you know that they were there, out there somewhere; somebody had cut down a few trees to block the traffic until somebody moved the trees away. Those were the days in which they were making weapons out of old--making shotguns out of old rusty pipes and things like that, as I recall. As a matter of fact, I think Mal Browne, who was with the AP, once did a story on the development of their weapons and so forth, which was a pretty good job.

But as for when they really began to crank the thing up, I couldn't, from my own experience, say. We do know now, of course, historically, that in view of what's come out, that--well, of course, they left a lot of stay-behinds. A lot of them went north, but they left a lot of stay-behinds who were ordered to step up the troubles. I forget--I won't even attempt to recall dates, but that's come out in--

G: I think 1959 was when the National Liberation Front was formed.

B: 1960.

G: Was it 1960?

B: 1960. December. Well, actually it was proclaimed--it may have been formed in 1959, but it was proclaimed, I think, in December 1960, from Hanoi, as I recall. This has come out in these various seminars, or--well, Stan Karnow has picked up part of this stuff. He picked it up from the North Vietnamese leaders when he was out there researching for this book he's done, yes.

G: You mentioned a couple of the old China hands, Wolf Ladejinsky for example. Was Ed Lansdale still there when you used to go to Vietnam?

B: Ed Lansdale was there. I first knew Ed Lansdale--I didn't know Ed Lansdale in the Philippines; I don't think I ever met him there. I did know him in Saigon in 1955-1956. Did we discuss him before?

G: I don't [remember].

B: I think we did, I don't know.

B: I think we did, yes. I'm not sure about that, but I think we did; I think we covered him pretty well.

G: Right. What was going on in Laos in these years? Was there a linkage perceived then between Laos and Vietnam?

B: Not a very clear one, as I recall. Laos, you had--well, let's see, when was it they had the SEATO conference in Bangkok? This would have been in the very early sixties, maybe 1961 or 1962. Anyway, we had a SEATO conference. I remember Dean Rusk--it had to be--well, see, when did the Kennedy Administration take office?

G: January of 1961.

B: Yes, all right. So it was 1961, because Dean Rusk was secretary of state, and Dean Rusk came out there for that SEATO conference, and he was secretary of state, of course. This was his debut on the international stage. I'd first known him in Japan when he was doing something to the peace treaty there.

Anyway--this is funny. Pepper [Robert] Martin of U.S. News & World Report and I were taking a swim in the Erawan Hotel swimming pool, and we came out of the swimming pool, and Roger Tubby, who was the State Department spokesman at the time, was having a briefing, we discovered, a backgrounder. And so we sat down there and Roger Tubby was saying, "Unless SEATO can agree on a course of action"--I should explain, at this time the Russians were airlifting stuff into the Plain of Jars. And he said, "Unless SEATO can agree to take action to stop this supply to the Pathet Lao, within the life of this conference"-- which was fifty-two hours, I forget how [much] later--"then the United States will have to act unilaterally and go in there with troops." Now, I'm paraphrasing what he said. Obviously, I don't remember perfectly.

G: But that's still pretty tough talk.

B: Yes. And Pepper Martin and I, Pepper had been in Asia pre-war, pre-Pearl Harbor, and I had been there almost since post-Pearl Harbor and so forth. We sort of looked at each other. Pepper said, "We're bluffing." And I said, "Mr. Tubby, would you repeat that again?" And he repeated it. And I said, "Wow." Pepper said, "They're bluffing.

We're bluffing." And sure enough, we were. Nothing happened. SEATO did not agree to go marching into Laos. First of all, you had the French there. They weren't about to march anywhere, especially in Asia, and none of the other SEATO people were interested in marching in, anyway. And so we didn't march in, either.

G: I think we did send some troops to Thailand, though, didn't we?

B: Well, we landed some marines along the Mekong. They didn't go into Laos, though.

After the conference was over, Dean Rusk had sort of a post mortem at the Embassy residence there in Bangkok, and we gave him really a hard time on this one. "Well, I thought we were going to be marching into Laos by now." (Laughter) "The conference ended yesterday and here you are. The fifty-two hours were up yesterday, and here we are sitting here in Bangkok." Old Rusk kept wetting his lips, you know. (Laughter) We made him squirm, but, well, they weren't going to do anything.

In connection with that, I'm not sure that I have things in sequence here, but I was in and out of Laos at that time, and the Erawan Hotel was a good intelligence center. I was sitting there around the pool one day, and an Air America pilot--turned out later to be a dope runner, but that's neither here nor there; he was trying to make a dishonest buck or so--he said, "Gee, I've been flying a general around." "Wow," I said, "who's that?" He said, "[T. J. H.] Trapnell."

G: Trapnell, huh?

B: Trapnell. I said, "Trapnell's in Laos?" He said, "Yes. Top secret." I said, "Thanks! That's all I need to know." So I got on the next plane to Laos. Trapnell by this time was back in the States, of course; he had left Vietnam. I had known him in Saigon. I liked him, I respected--

G: About when was this?

B: I'd first known Trapnell--

G: No, no, when did you get this report from the Air America pilot? Can you give a year?

B: Oh, I'd say it had to be--I think it was 1961. I couldn't swear to that, but it was at the time that Kennedy was considering going into Laos. We were considering going into Laos, and I--1961, 1962, could have been either.

G: It would had to have been early 1962.

B: I'd say it was not long after Kennedy took office, certainly.

G: Because we got the Laos Accords in what, June of 1962?

B: Did we? Was it that early?

G: I think so. Yes. I think so.

B: Yes, well, anyway--

G: The special significance of this was that Trapnell--

B: Pepper Martin--I told Pepper about that, said "Let's get out to Vientiane," so we were on the next plane to Vientiane. Of course, the embassy: "Trapnell? Trapnell? Never heard of him." And the MAAG, I forget what they called the MAAG, they had never heard of him, either. So we went out there, and I said, "I want to leave a note for

General Trapnell." I said, "There are two ways to do this. Either he's going to see us willingly, or we're going to have to lie in ambush for him. I want to leave a note for him." I wrote a note that said, "Dear Trap. I know you're here and I want to see you. Shall we make it easy for both of us? I'll be at the Constellation Hotel, room such-and-such." Within an hour I got a call from Trapnell saying "Come on out." (Laughter)

G: This is the guy the embassy never heard of.

B: Yes, this is the guy they all never heard of. Well, they were doing their job, you know, his presence there was supposed to be top secret. But this Air America guy had tipped me off about it. He knew; he was the guy who was flying him around. And what Trapnell was out there for, he said, "Oh, since you found me out, I've got to confess." He said he'd come out there to find out if this was the sort of place that we should fight in.

G: What did he think?

B: No. He said he didn't think it was a very good place to fight in. Yes. That was exactly--that's what I liked about Trapnell. He was an honest man. He'd been flying all over the country because he wanted to see what the terrain was like, and so forth. He thought it was a lousy place to fight in.

No. It seemed to be obvious--well, no, it wasn't obvious. It seemed to me that we were going to fight somewhere in Southeast Asia at some point. But I think that Trapnell's report to Kennedy, and he was there--as I understand it, he was sent out by Kennedy.

G: Not by the Joint Chiefs?

B: I think at Kennedy's special instructions. Now, we'll have to say that's speculation or hearsay; I don't know for a fact that that was the case. But he was sent out there, and it was a presidential mission, as it were.

G: That was his style. That was the way Kennedy operated.

B: Yes. It would seem to me that it would be--but again, I don't know where the orders came from, whether it was Kennedy or the JCS. At any rate, Trapnell told us he didn't think that Laos was a good place to fight for all the obvious reasons: you couldn't run troop transports or battleships up the Mekong, and all that, and so forth.

G: Was that for background only, or were you able to use it?

B: I forget exactly how I did use it. I think that we quoted him on it. I think maybe not directly, but I used his name. I said, "You know, I'm going to have to say you're in Laos." I'd have to go back and look at the story.

G: That's okay.

B: I just don't remember. But I know I wrote that Laos was not the place to fight, so I must have quoted him. I couldn't have attributed that to--besides, I'd found him out and I knew he was there. And he just sort of threw up his hands. There wasn't anything he could do, much, after that. And I can only assume that he notified Washington that, "Okay, they got me and I've got to tell them."

G: That's interesting. I saw him a long time ago. He's in Falls Church, I think.

B: He is?

G: Yes. Plays golf every day.

B: He does?

G: Yes.

B: That's nice to know, because you know, his first wife died or something like that. Then he married an airline stewardess, and they used to come to Tokyo quite often. I used to go out with them, dinner and drinks and things like that. Trap and I got along very well together.

G: He's in the book.

B: He is?

G: Yes.

B: Well, okay.

G: He won't tell me what he shoots on the golf course, though. That was--

Okay, we mentioned the Laotian settlement in 1962, I think it was June of 1962. And Averell Harriman went out and sat down at the negotiating table. You wrote that the settlement might save face, but it won't save Laos.

B: Did I say that? Well, that was pretty good, wasn't it? (Laughter) I also wrote in one story, I think, that it's easy to see why the communists are happy with the Laos Accords, but it's not very easy to see why we should be. But we were congratulating ourselves. I didn't see anything--incidentally, what the Laos Accords did was two things: it institutionalized the presence of [North] Vietnamese troops inside Laos, and it institutionalized the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

G: Of course the Vietnamese troops were supposed to get out, weren't they?

B: Yes, but they never did.

G: Can you vouch for that?

B: Can I swear that there were Vietnamese troops in Laos during that period?

G: Can you remember how you know what you know?

B: Well, I know for one thing, when the Russians were flying supplies in, we kept hearing this, but we didn't know it. I engineered the chartering of an airplane, a light wing, a little airplane, and there were six of us. We prorated the cost; this cost six hundred dollars, I remember. And we flew over the Plain of Jars to see if any Russian planes were coming in there.

G: Were you taking a little risk doing that?

B: I think so. But we had a Martinique pilot whose first name was Jacques something, a black fellow, but he'd fly anywhere. He was a real good bush pilot, and he knew that whole area. We flew over there at the highest this little airplane would fly, and we saw the Russian planes came in, and we turned around and we came back and said, "Yep, they're flying in there." Now, I did not fly over and see any Vietnamese troops on the ground. I can only--no, I couldn't swear, I couldn't prove in court that there were no Vietnamese troops in Laos at that time, or that there were. I do know that all the correspondents, nearly all the correspondents, including myself, were writing stories scoffing at these reports. And then I remember the spokesman--

they had a spokesman. He wasn't the most polished spokesman; he was a very nice, earnest young Lao. And they captured a couple of guys who they said were Vietnamese soldiers, and they introduced them to the correspondents. And they were only teen-aged kids and so forth, and we all laughed at that and nobody believed it.

The Vietnamese would never allow the ICC into its territory. They would never allow any of the ICC teams to go in to inspect. The other, the government side, allowed the ICC to go anywhere they wanted to. One normally assumes that the other side had something to hide by refusing permission for the ICC to go in.

G: The CIA, I think, always maintained that the North Vietnamese did not leave.

B: Well, I don't believe that the Vietnamese ever left. I think the CIA was right in that assessment. And I'm sure that they had damned good intelligence on this, because they had people out there in the boondocks. They had all sorts of agency sources. It would have been very easy for them to determine whether they were there or not. I think that they never did leave; I don't think they ever left. I think that's why the ICC was never allowed to go in there. Of course, on the ICC, they had their neutrals and we had our neutrals. We had the Canadians.

G: They had the Indians, right?

B: They had the Indians, yes. And--well, there were--

G: Weren't the Poles--?

B: I think the Poles, yes, the Poles. The Indians always sided with the

Poles. The ICC was a farce, just as it was in Vietnam earlier, and later.

G: Did you talk to Harriman during this period when they were negotiating the thing?

B: I don't think that I talked to them--let's see. I must have, at some point. Where were they negotiating?

G: I'm not sure.

B: I think that they did most of the negotiating in Geneva.

G: Yes, I think so.

B: I talked to Harriman later about it.

G: He came to Saigon, didn't he, afterward?

B: I don't remember.

G: My recollection is that he came and talked to Diem and talked very tough.

B: Very possible. I don't recall whether he did or not. But as I think I have mentioned before, Harriman was not interested in Asia. He did not want to be involved in Asia. He was a European, in that sense. I remember one speech that Harriman gave years later, he referred to his Asia period: "During that period I was exiled to Asia." He didn't really like dealing with those funny little people out there, those funny little countries. He liked something that--he liked Paris and London and Rome, you know, and Moscow. He did talk very, very tough. I know this from people who were present, our own embassy people and so forth. He talked very tough to Phoumi Nosavan and all those characters and so forth. He told them to do this and do that in good

Harriman style, very salty, and so on. He didn't want any nonsense from them, and all that.

G: He was known as the crocodile back here. Did that name follow him out to the Far East?

B: Well, I guess so, but he was never really known very well in the Far East. He came to Asia in connection with this, the Laos Accords, and then he was in India when the Chinese came in, he came out there.

G: You said we were praising the agreement and were very happy with it. You were taking a rather less sanguine view.

B: I took a pretty jaundiced view of it myself, because I thought it solved nothing for us. It might have been, as we always said, "Well, what else could you do? It was the best we could get." Well, I think it wasn't very good.

G: Okay. There is some dissension about why the Laos Accords fell apart, why the Troika never worked in Vientiane. Sides are taken on this. Some people say we subverted the accords; the other side says, "No, no, no, the communists subverted the accords." Who's right?

B: Probably both, to some extent. I think probably the communists started subverting them first, and then we started our own subverting. Neither side was wholly clean, by any means, in this whole thing. And there was a lot going on that many of us didn't know anything--

G: Was the CIA running its own show over there?

B: I think so, yes. They were running their own show pretty much, yes. My good friend--I hope he's still a friend--Campbell James, who was one of the agency people there in Laos, who looked like a British

expatriate, looked like a British remittance man--he was a rather flamboyant type. I wrote a piece for the old Saturday Evening Post about Laos in which I mentioned Campbell James--the character, not his name, I never blew a CIA man's name, but I did mention him. He carried a cane which contained not a sword but brandy, very good brandy. (Laughter) Campbell lives right down here on Dupont Circle, by the way, in a townhouse. Oh, he could tell you lots of fascinating stories.

G: I love to get that sort of thing. How about Mr. Pop, as he was called?

B: Pop Buell?

G: Yes.

B: Pop Buell is dead, of course. I knew Mr. Pop, yes, I knew Pop Buell quite well in the early part of that affair and then later on after it got very serious and so forth. Pop Buell was a character. The last time I saw Pop Buell was in a cheap little hotel in Bangkok near the railroad tracks. That was about three or four years ago. He had a room there and about, I don't know, half a dozen Lao in there, mostly male, or Hmong, as they now call them, living in his room. He was looking after them as best he could. He would disappear for a while, and then he'd come back. He was out of things; he'd been retired from government. He'd make trips. But actually, he was all right, he was in a good situation. But he was spending most of the money he had on looking after the Lao people he felt he should look after, and that

sort of thing. Then he died; he went over to the Philippines, died, had a heart attack or something.

G: Some of those guys seem to have fought that war on a very personal basis.

B: He was one of them, yes.

G: Personal loyalties were very important.

B: Oh, yes. This was one of the interesting things about this whole thing in Laos. There were people like Pop Buell, an Indiana farmer, of course, going out there. I think he went out there mainly--these people were sort of misfits back home, very often, I think. And they went out there and they found a cause they could believe in, and Pop was fiercely devoted to the Meo. He thought that they were the greatest people who ever lived, very possessive, very arrogant. I remember once when Bob Shaplen, Arnaud de Borchgrave, and I flew up to Sam Thong [?]. We had an okay from Bill Sullivan, the ambassador, and from Joe Mendenhall, who was the head of the AID mission there. They flew us up there, and we wanted to spend the night, and Pop said, "You can't spend the night here, it's too dangerous. I don't want you up here anyway." And I said, "Now wait just a minute." He said, "You heard me." I said, "Let's get on the radio to Vientiane. Let's get to the Ambassador." Pop said, "Well, that won't be necessary. We'll just get Mendenhall." "Get Mendenhall," I said. Well, I'd known Joe in Saigon years earlier, and I said, "We're having a little argument up here. You know, Pop--we want to spend the night. Pop says it's too dangerous." And he said, "Let me talk to Pop." So we spent the

night. But Pop bellowed at us all night long. (Laughter) We slept out at his house. He sat there drinking beer and denouncing correspondents. He didn't know why he had to put up with all these damn people, and so forth. And finally I got kind of mad after a while. I said, "Look, you think you've got the only goddamned war in town. You know, there's another war going on over in Vietnam, not so far from here. It's kind of serious, too." And so after that we got along all right. The next day we wanted to see Vang Pao. Pop went through the roof on that one. "By God, you can't see Vang Pao." So, "Let's get on the radio." (Laughter)

G: What was his reason. What--?

B: He was protecting Vang Pao. Vang Pao was his buddy; he didn't think that Vang Pao should talk to us. (Laughter) As a matter of fact, he probably shouldn't have, because what happened was this: Vang Pao and Pop cooked up this story, which they told us, that a Chinese battalion had entered the war. This cropped up once in a while. So they came out and said, "Yes, the Chinese are out there, a whole battalion of them. They're Chinese communists." Well, we didn't believe this, but you know, Vang Pao was very persuasive, "Oh, yes, he'd--" So on the way back, before we left for Vientiane, we requested permission by radio to see the Ambassador immediately upon our return. And so here Sullivan had these three prima donnas--Shaplen, de Borchgrave and me, you know. Well, he saw us and so forth. I said, "Well, what about the Chinese battalion? You never told us about that, see." He said, "What Chinese battalion?" I said, "Pop Buell and Vang Pao say there's

a Chinese battalion up there." Bill sort of, "Well, what can I say?" I said, "How would you handle this if you were a correspondent?" And if I remember this correctly, he said, "I suppose I'd have to say that they said it. Then I would say that diplomatic sources discounted it." (Laughter)

G: Which is exactly what happened.

B: And I said, "Okay, that's what I thought." (Laughter) And I don't think there was any Chinese battalion, but you know, they said it.

G: At one point or another, the Chinese were credited with having built a road across northern Laos, going east to west.

B: Oh, they built roads all over the place; they're the greatest little road builders in the world, you know. Yes, they did build a road in Laos, built a lot of roads. They built a road in Nepal. (Laughter) They're great road builders.

G: Okay. Let's talk about the early sixties now. Let's talk about Diem a little bit. It's well known that opinion on Diem among Americans became divided in the late fifties, and the division got worse as time went on.

B: Yes.

G: What were the bases for the discontent? What was the basis that people argued from for and against Diem?

B: I suppose the critics of Diem, the chief criticism was that he was autocratic, he was Confucian in manner--all of which was true--that his brother, [Ngo Dinh] Nhu, was a bad person, that Madame Nhu was a bad person, that his government was corrupt, and, of course, the

Buddhist thing. There were a lot of people, a lot of Americans out there, who felt that it was wrong, morally or religiously wrong, to have a Catholic president of a Buddhist country. Well, you know, there are lots of Catholics in Asia. The Philippines is about 80 per cent Catholic, nominally, and so forth.

G: Let me ask you this: what difference did it make to have a Catholic president?

B: I don't think it made all that much difference. I think Diem was a Vietnamese before he was a Catholic, although he was a devout Catholic. He was not like some Catholics I can mention, some Vietnamese Catholics, like [Nguyen Van] Thieu. Thieu married a Catholic, and he was a very, very nominal Catholic, however. He was a Catholic because it was politically advantageous and so forth. Diem was, I think, a true believer.

That he wouldn't listen to advice, that was another thing that he was accused of, and it's true, he wouldn't, he was a very, very stubborn man. That he was intransigent, he wouldn't broaden the base of his government. You know, Americans always want a government in a Third World country to broaden its base, take in some of the loyal opposition, you know. Well, what they don't reckon with is that in Third World countries there is no loyal opposition. The opposition is disloyal opposition, and that's the way it is. And we were asking Diem to take in some opposition. And he wasn't about to do that. Those are some of the primary--you say, what difference does it make? It created a picture--what difference did it make if he was a

Catholic? I suppose it gave the impression to a lot of people, or some people, that the Catholic President of a Buddhist country was persecuting the Buddhists.

G: Was he?

B: That, I think, is a moot question. The Buddhists were in opposition, no question about that, and what happened in Hue that year, whichever it was, it was early 1963 or early 1962, whenever it was up there, when this whole thing began to go up in flames. Of course, somebody was killed up there, and all that. Who was at fault, I don't know. The fact was that, as in so many countries in Asia where you had a Catholic minority, because the Catholics had the good schools, and they knew something about western technology, they exercised an influence that was out of all proportion to their numbers. And that was certainly true in Vietnam. The Buddhists didn't have the schools; they didn't have anything to match Catholic learning, and that sort of thing.

G: You're saying that if there was persecution, it did not predate the Buddhist troubles, which began, I think, in April of 1963?

B: Yes, I guess it was April of 1963. Well, there was always--you know, the Vietnamese used to chop up the Catholic priests from time to time. Their presence was resented back in the nineteenth century and even before that. I forget when they first went in there--Minh [Mang], he was in the eighties [1830s], and so forth, but they were there before. So there was friction. It didn't just begin all of a sudden in 1963.

G: Okay. What divisions were caused within the country team over this issue of do we sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem?

B: Ngo Dinh Diem. Well--

G: Were there factions?

B: Yes, there were. I'm trying to sort them out. I think that Fritz Nolting, as ambassador, his mission, when he [was] sent out there, was to get along with Ngo Dinh Diem. Those were his instructions. That's my understanding of it.

G: The secondary accounts usually say that Nolting was a Diem man, and that Jocko [John] Richardson was a Diem man, because he was a Nhu man. He had close ties to Nhu and so on. Then they go on to say but lots of the CIA field people were anti-Diem because they could see the effect of his policy in the countryside. Is that an accurate reflection of what was going on?

B: I think that that probably was the case, because some of the guys who were down there on the working level, who were out in the boondocks, had a somewhat different picture of things, a different view, than those men who were higher up who were in Saigon.

G: How about Lou Conein? There's an example. Did he have a position?

B: I think Lou's position was that he'd do whatever he was told to do, and if he was told to go get Diem, why, he'd go get Diem.

G: How about the guy who was running the strategic hamlet program? I'm trying to think of his name. He was one of Lansdale's team who had come back.

B: Rufe Phillips?

G: Yes.

B: Rufe Phillips. Rufe was a very solid sort of a guy, I always thought. He wasn't left, he wasn't right, he was a good middle-of-the-road type. And Rufe had problems with the strategic hamlet program, I think. Was he running it?

G: He was our senior American--

B: He had a lot to do with it, yes. You know, the concept, I thought, I still think, was very good. The execution was pretty lousy. And of course as you know, it was based on the Malaysian experience and so forth, but practically all your insurgents were Chinese in Malaysia, whereas in Vietnam they were Vietnamese and you couldn't isolate them as easily. My memory doesn't serve me very well on that particular chapter, except that I have a very high opinion of Rufe Phillips. He's a capable--

G: I know he did come back in the fall of 1963--

B: Yes.

G: --and give a very critical report--

B: He did.

G: --on how the strategic hamlet program was going.

B: Yes. I didn't recall that, but now that you mention it, I'm sure that he did.

(Interruption)

G: --abortive coup in Saigon in 1960, the paratroopers' coup?

B: No.

G: Okay. How about the bombing of the presidential palace in 1962, when a couple of the pilots flew over and expressed their displeasure with Diem?

B: No, I didn't cover that. But a very funny thing in connection with that: I was in Saigon a couple of weeks before that happened.

G: Before the bombing?

B: Before the bombing, yes. And I was talking to a Vietnamese, who's now dead--well, his name was Dong Duc Khoi; I can mention his name now that he's dead--

G: K-H-O-I?

B: Yes, Khoi. You've heard his name. He was one of [Nguyen Cao] Ky's advisers. He was much smarter. Khoi was a good man, an intriguer like all Vietnamese, but a good man. And Khoi had a little office, a funny little office next to the Majestic Hotel, in this dark room; it was a black chamber. (Laughter) Khoi used to sit in--it was really crazy, now that one thinks about it--Khoi used to sit in there and plot all the time. He was Diem's spokesman, and one time, this could have been 1962, after we'd seen Diem, he interpreted Diem to me for four hours or so. This was one of those long ones. Finally we staggered out of there and went down to L'Amiral and had to have a two or three or four-martini lunch, and Khoi said, "You've got to get rid of him," meaning Diem.

G: Now, this is Diem's interpreter?

B: Yes, this is Diem's--well, he's more than an interpreter. He was the GVN's liaison officer with the foreign press. He was saying, "You've

got to get rid of him." I was a little bit shocked, as much as I'd been around Asia. I said, "But Khoi, you're telling me we've got to get rid of--what do you mean, shoot him?" He said, "I don't care. You've got to get rid of him. Shoot him, it's too bad," or words to that effect, that was his attitude. I said, "Here you're his spokesman. Now you're sitting here telling me, an American correspondent, we ought to shoot the guy." He said, "Yeah. You've got to get rid of him. Someway or other, you've got to get rid of him. If you want to win this war," or anything like that.

Well anyway, I had a long talk with Khoi sitting in this black chamber. There had been an attack on the President's life not long before, and we were talking about Diem's situation, and he said, "And there's going to be another one sometime soon." And then I talked with a guy in the American embassy, a young political officer, whose name I will not mention.

G: A political officer?

B: He was a political officer. He could have been CIA, but I don't think so, I don't know. He was not known to me as a CIA officer.

G: Is that why you're not mentioning his name? I'm not going to try to probe you on that.

B: No, no. I wouldn't mention his name either way, because I don't know. But he had always been very helpful to me before, and I'd come to trust his judgment. And he was telling me that there was going to be another attack on the President soon. Well, you know, I wrote a long story, and I think I said maybe in the first or second paragraph that

there was going to be--Ngo Dinh Diem's in trouble; having survived X number of assassination attempts, he's likely to be the victim of another one, and so forth and so on. So ten days or two weeks later I'm in New Delhi, in my room at the Ashoka Hotel, and I've got my radio on to catch the news, and the first item on the news [is that] the palace has been bombed in Saigon. I said, "Oh, Jesus Christ!" (Laughter)

G: Were you afraid you'd made a self-fulfilling prophecy?

B: I was afraid I'd been too right. I thought about, well, should I rush to Saigon? Well, they'd missed the palace. I heard later that Madame Nhu was furious because she was upstairs, and she ran down the hall and fell in the hole that the bomb had created and fell down to the first floor. And when Madame Nhu got furious, she could be pretty furious. So I didn't rush back; there wasn't anything to do. The story was--they didn't kill anybody, as I recall, certainly didn't kill any of the family. But I stopped off there on my way back to Tokyo, where I was living, stopped off in Saigon and went to see Khoi. And he said, "Well, the old man didn't like your story very much." (Laughter)

And I said, "Did you know that was going to happen?" He said, "No, I didn't know anything like <u>that</u> was going to happen," and so forth. And I saw my friend at the American Embassy, and he professed complete lack of knowledge that anything like that was going to happen. But both of them had been very sure that there was going to be another attempt. So they obviously knew something, and they were sort of

letting me know to expect something. But you know, you write a story like that, it's sort of one of those CYA stories, you cover yourself in case there is another attempt, and so I made a lot of brownie points with my office for having predicted the attempted assassinations. (Laughter)

G: Did they credit you with more than you really knew?

B: Well, maybe they did, I don't know. (Laughter) But an awful lot of people, some of them my colleagues who were resident in Saigon, sort of wondered about how much I knew about that, too, and [asked], "What caused you to write a story like that?" Needless to say, I did not quote Khoi, and I did not quote an embassy source.

G: Did you know George Carver when he was in the embassy in Saigon?

B: George Carver, to the best of my knowledge, I have never met. It's a curious thing, as much as he was in Vietnam.

G: He was a relatively junior man, I think, when he was in Vietnam. He was there in 1960, I think.

B: One of these days I guess I have to talk to George Carver. He's now with the national information center or something like that.

G: He's with the--

B: Georgetown institute of strategic studies. [Center for Strategic and International Studies]

G: --CSIS, yes.

B: GCSIS, yes. I haven't had the occasion to talk to him yet.

G: Ray Cline is there, too.

B: Yes, I know Ray. I see Ray from time to time.

G: How about Madame [Anna] Chennault? Did you know her? You couldn't have helped it, I suppose.

B: I didn't know her very well, no. The last time I saw her was at a funeral here for a Chinese friend of mine who died in Taiwan. I knew her very slightly in Taipei. There's a very funny story, if you want to hear it. It has nothing to do with Vietnam, though.

G: Sure. Well, if it has to do with Madame Chennault, it may have something to do with it.

B: Well, anyway, there was a crisis in the Formosa Straits, and never mind what it was, there was a big crisis. This was back in the fifties. And there were about seventy-five correspondents in town with nothing to do but chafing at the bit to do something, and the Chinese Nationalists laid on a couple of battalion maneuvers just to get them out of the Friends of China Club and give them something to write about. There was a lot of talk about unleashing Chiang Kai-shek and that sort of thing. And I couldn't think of anything duller than going out and watching a couple of Chinese battalions on maneuvers, and I looked on the bulletin board at the club, and there was a fashion show sponsored by the Chinese and the American women's associations and so forth. So I decided to go to that instead.

G: "Fashion Show in Midst of Crisis," was that your lead?

B: Yes, the fashion show. Just to show that life went on in Taipei. And the organizer of it on the Chinese side was Anna Chennault, who was and still is a rather shapely lady. Anyway, I went to this. It was

supposed to start at, I think, around five o'clock. It didn't start at five o'clock, it didn't start at five-thirty, and finally I [asked] a woman from USIS with whom I went, I said, "Go back there backstage and find out what the hell is going on back there." And she came out and she was really doubled up; she was in stitches. I said finally, "What is it?" And she said, "Well, it's a big fight over girdles." (Laughter)

She said, "The American women"--you know, they had a catwalk out there, the women were all to all parade down there showing off these new dresses and so forth, including some cheongsams [?], those high-slit Chinese skirts, real sexy business. And the American women--mind you, this was in the 1950s--refused to go on unless the Chinese women wore girdles, too, because all the American women wore girdles. Well, the Chinese position was that they had never worn girdles in their lives and they weren't about to start now. And so there was a stalemate. (Laughter)

G: Let me understand this, as Mike Wallace would say. Was it that a girdle-less performance would be more provocative than otherwise?

B: Well, these American women, of course, they were a little bit broader abeam than these Chinese women. That was one thing; they would show to a distinct disadvantage back in Paris. Anyhow, morally speaking, they wanted the Chinese women to wear girdles, too. And so I was so glad I hadn't gone to the battalion maneuvers, I went back and I filed on this. The next day, the New York Times, Time magazine, the news agencies, everybody got rockets on my fashion show story. (Laughter)

G: You had covered the real story.

B: I had hit the real story, Beech scored again, yes.

G: That's marvelous. That's the sign of a good reporter, you've got the nose for those things.

B: Well, that's a long way from Vietnam.

G: That's okay. Let's talk about the Buddhist troubles, which begin in the spring of 1963, I guess it is. The most notorious name, if that's the right word, to come out of that was the name of the leader of the more radical element, Thich Tri Quang.

B: Thich Tri Quang, yes.

G: Did you talk to him? Did you have any contact with him?

B: I talked to him once, and I spent a great many man-hours trying to see that gentleman. And I managed to talk to him for a few minutes once before I was cut off. I don't know exactly what happened, this was all being done in Vietnamese, but the interview was terminated. So I cannot say that I knew Thich Tri Quang, no, I did not. I know that Maxwell Taylor used to refer to him in his dispatches back to Washington as the Makarios of Southeast Asia. I know that because I read these dispatches. They were classified, but somebody showed them to me. And there was nothing really in them that wasn't in a lot of news stories, and so forth. I think that we attributed an awful lot of power and influence, an awful lot more, to the Buddhist movement than it actually ever had. Its power base was always very, very narrow, and--

G: How could they put these demonstrations on?

B: Well, when they started burning themselves, it created quite a sensation back here. I was in Saigon when this first monk burned himself.

G: [Quang] Duc, was that his name?

B: I think it was, yes, Duc. And Mal Browne took pictures, and other people took pictures of it. Dave Halberstam was there, and Neil Sheehan, everybody was notified in advance that there was going to be an immolation. The Buddhists were very clever, you know, they were using the press. They manipulated the press very adroitly. And of course they were helped by the Diem government, which was very heavy-handed in trying to suppress the Buddhists. Every time they tried to demonstrate and so forth the cops would come in and beat them up, makes great picture material.

Of course, there were other immolations, self-immolations, and this had a profound impact back here in Washington, of course. I remember hearing in Saigon, whether this was true or not, that actually the picture, that Buddhist monk burning himself to death in Saigon, had a tremendous impact on Kennedy, as well it might have, and that what he was reading in the New York Times under Dave Halberstam's byline had a greater influence on him than what the embassy was reporting, which doesn't surprise me, as a matter of fact, because very often the press was ahead of the embassy in reporting what was going on, just as sometimes we were ahead of MACV later on, much to Westmoreland's distress.

But the Buddhists--I used to ask them--while I had very little luck with Thich Tri Quang, I did talk to a number of others, and I

would say, "Well, what do you want?" "Social justice" and so forth. I said, "Would you please define social justice?" Fine, that seems reasonable. They wanted better representation, they wanted elimination of poverty, and all those things, which seemed kind of reasonable, and they wanted Diem to go. He represented an alien faith to them.

G: Did the Buddhists want to run the country or did they want to say who ran the country?

B: Well, that's a good question. It was extremely difficult to find out what they did want, because even under the best of circumstances they were vague. I think that they wanted to run the country. I think that they wanted political power. That's my feeling. I know that the Buddhists--I remember going over to the American Vietnam Society; I was trying to find out something about Buddhism in Vietnam, you know. And so there was a Vietnamese gentleman in there who spoke English who worked there. He said, "So, somebody at last is interested in Buddhism in this country. That's very interesting. Well now you are going to find out a lot about the Buddhists," and so forth.

I think that it was pretty evident that they wanted political power, to the extent, certainly, that they wanted Diem out. They felt that they were being persecuted, at least they said they were. But I must say I found them, while not wholly inscrutable, very difficult to pin down to anything.

G: You spoke of the impact of the immolations back in Washington. As an old Asian hand now, what is the significance of this when a Buddhist

monk sits down in public and pours gasoline on himself and sets himself afire in protest? Does this mean something different in the Asian mind than it does in the occidental mind?

B: That's a very good question. That's a very good question, and I can't give you quite a satisfactory answer to that. Of course, self-immolation is not unknown among Asians and Buddhists and so forth. They were using self-immolation as a political device, to get attention, and it was very, very successful. Now, a year later, they were ordering immolations, but nobody paid much attention to them. I would get calls saying there will be an immolation at 9:00 p.m. at Hai Ba Trung [?] and such-and-such a place. Well, if you wanted to cover it, you went out and covered it. But I remember seeing General Taylor one day, and we were talking about the latest Buddhist activities, and he said, "You know, they sent a delegation in to see me the other day. They were complaining about how they weren't getting any press coverage of their immolations."

G: That's a rather naive thing to complain about.

B: Well, they'd gotten such a good press the year before, it had become a tired act. And a lot of people were disgusted. I remember one of my colleagues, Ray Coffey, had come out to Vietnam to cover that, to sort of take some of the heat off me. I'd been covering it a long time. Anyway, Ray called from Hue about the immolation up there of a fifteen-year-old girl. Ray was really in a rage, because they hadn't really given her enough gasoline to do the job properly, and the poor girl was half burned to death and was writhing on the ground. Ray

said it was the most revolting thing he'd ever seen. In other words, it was a huge success as a real attention-getter, as a political device, at the beginning, but later on it lost its value; it was trivialized.

G: Let me ask you this. You're a student of Asian culture and [have] a lot of experience there. Should a parallel be drawn between this kind of a dramatic suicidal protest gesture and a Japanese who commits what is properly called hara-kiri, but I think that's the vulgar name for it?

B: Seppuku?

G: Yes. They're both very painful ways to go.

B: Yes, of course. You said that I was a student of Asian culture. Sometimes I think I don't really know anything about Asian culture. I only spent thirty-odd years out there. But your question was, was there any--

G: Parallel.

B: --parallel, cultural parallel? No, I don't think so. In Japan, which I think I understand better than the other countries, it was a matter of honor, and in the Vietnamese context, it was a matter of martyrdom. They needed martyrs. That's why this man was ordered to burn himself. I might in passing here [say] there was one attempted immolation which didn't come off. The cops got there and took the man to the police hospital. And I camped out at that hospital, because I wanted to talk to this man while he was still conscious and so forth and to get the story, because I wanted to know who told him to do it, how it

happened, who gave him the gasoline, who gave him the--you know, the works, the mechanics of it. Well, I camped out at that hospital for a whole day and the better part of a night, and then it was reported that the man who had previously been reported on his way to recovery was dead.

G: Let me get this straight. He had not had time to ignite himself?

B: He did, yes. He had burned himself, but the job was not completed, so he didn't die until after he was taken to the hospital, and the word I'd had at the hospital initially was that his chances for recovery were very good. And then while I was there at the hospital, he died. Apparently he suffered a turn for the worse. It was one of those things that I will never understand. I thought, "Well, here goes a chance to find out what really happened."

G: What was the official cause of death, died of burns?

B: I suppose so, yes. So many people were dying all over the place, I don't know that anyone--he was just dead, and so I just walked away. I thought, "Well, hell. There goes another chance to find out."

G: Did you ever satisfy yourself about the mechanics of this thing? There were charges that they were drugged, there were charges that they were hypnotized, all kinds of things.

B: No, I was never satisfied. I never was able to run down, to my satisfaction, how the whole thing was done.

G: Did you cover the raids on the pagodas in August?

B: No, I wasn't there. I wasn't there for those raids, no. It was a

very stupid thing for the government to do. But I wasn't there when that happened.

G: Do you remember anything about the role of Ambassador Trueheart while Ambassador Nolting went on vacation that summer, off to the Aegean, I think it was.

B: Yes. Well, Bill Trueheart, who's selling real estate here in Washington now, as you know, I ran into him coming out of the supermarket the other day, and he said, "(snaps fingers)," I said, "Saigon," and he said, "Yes. Real estate. Yes." (Laughter) And that was our greeting.

G: That was it.

B: Yes. Well, he wasn't very popular with the correspondents out there, some of the residents. I was still commuting between Tokyo and Saigon, which explains these gaps in my coverage. I was still trying to cover all of Asia. There were a few things going on elsewhere. We should have had another man out there, but anyway--Trueheart--several correspondents were roughed up, or beaten up.

G: I think Peter Arnett, wasn't he?

B: I think Peter Arnett must have. I don't recall. I know John Sharkey, who's on the Washington Post here now, he was an NBC stringer out there, and John got pretty badly clubbed about the head. I saw him later, and he said, "I'm going back to the States." I said, "Well, why? The story is just getting good." He said, "I don't like a country where the police beat you up." And so he came back, he did. He's on the Washington Post foreign desk. But a number of the

correspondents had been roughed up by Vietnamese police in the performance of their duties. Both of them felt they were performing their duties. And the American correspondents complained to the embassy, and I don't think that they felt that Trueheart was as sympathetic to their situation as he might have been. I don't know.

G: I think Halberstam tells a story of intervening in a situation on the street, where I believe it's Neil Sheehan and Mal Browne [who] were being roughed up, and of course Halberstam is a great big guy, and he exerted a decisive influence on the thing. And then I think he says that he and Sheehan went and lived for a while with--

B: John Mecklin?

G: Yes.

B: Yes, they did. Well, as a matter of fact, Sheehan is no little guy, wasn't in those days, at least, and Mal Browne is fairly tall. Of course Dave is bigger than both of them.

G: Were you ever frightened for your safety in Saigon?

B: No, not really, no. Probably, not being resident there during that particular period, I wasn't exposed as much as the resident correspondents were who were out all the time. No, I was never--

G: You were never on one of the hit lists that was being circulated?

B: No, I guess I just wasn't important enough.

(Laughter)

It's sort of a shameful admission to make, but I really wasn't.

G: John Mecklin said he headed one of them, that he was right up on top.

B: Yes, well, that's very possible. There were some very nasty people in that government there.

G: You mentioned that Ambassador Trueheart wasn't as sympathetic as the reporters said he might have been. What was the atmosphere between the embassy and reporters by this time? Can you generalize about that?

B: No, I'd say that during this particular period when Nolting was there and there was a very small press corps, [it was] very, very bad. As a matter of fact, you had three very junior correspondents who later became very well known. You had Mal Browne, AP; Neil Sheehan, UPI, and Dave Halberstam. Dave was perhaps the best known. Neil had come down from Tokyo where he'd been working for UPI and been editing an army newspaper, something like that, before that. And Mal had come out from Baltimore, I believe. And they were very young and eager and so forth.

But insofar as carrying clout with the American mission there, people like Pepper Martin and I carried more, because we were independent, and we came in--and we weren't resident; that may have had something to do with it. But we raised hell about a lot of things, when the younger correspondents didn't have quite the same standing, although they came to have that standing later. But simply because Martin and I had been out there a long time and were better known, if nothing else, when we complained, then we got some attention. And one of the things that we became very upset about was when we were bringing in supplies and unloading them at the foot of Rue Catinat, but the

American embassy wouldn't admit it, you know, because it was contrary to the Geneva Accords. And they were asking us to play along with this game. Pepper Martin and I became very nasty about that. We wanted to go down to Vung Tau, Cap St. Jacques, and ride up river with one of these convoys, and they'd refused us permission to. We'd made this request as a deliberate test.

G: On what grounds were they refusing you?

B: Well, I forget just what it was. Officially, there were no American supplies coming in there, and so I think that was the [reason] for us. And we locked horns with, I guess it was John Ansbacher [?], who was the public affairs officer at the time. And Pepper Martin sent off a very savage message to Dave Lawrence, the editor and publisher of U.S. News & World Report, telling him about this intolerable situation, and I sent off a message. Pepper called up Ansbacher and read it to him, and Ansbacher let out a shriek and said, "That's unfair." Anyhow, in very short order we got a call from the Ambassador's office saying he would like to see us. So we went over there. As I recall, it was a Sunday morning or a Saturday morning, because I know Nolting had been out playing tennis; I believe he came in in his sweatshirt and slacks and so on. And he said, "What's the matter, gentlemen? What can I do for you?" And Pepper says, "This jerk over here"--pointing an accusing finger at Ansbacher, and I said, "Oh, Pepper!" Pepper was the tough guy, I was the nice guy; that's the way we used to work this thing.

G: Oh, you were the nice guy, he was the hard man, is that it?

B: Yes, he was the hard man. Oh, he could be brutal. Still can be, as a matter of fact. A very direct man, Pepper Martin.

And so we wanted this, we wanted that, we wanted to fly helicopter missions. We were flying the Vietnamese into combat in these old, beat-up, banana-shaped--I forget what they called those.

G: C-34s, I think.

B: No, they were helicopters.

G: They were 34s. H-34s.

B: H-34s, yes, I guess they were. Gee, I don't like to fly in those things.

G: Maybe it was H-28s, but--

B: Whatever they were, they were old and rickety. And we wanted to do all these interesting things, you know, and we were being denied permission to do it. Well, so were the resident correspondents, so they were sore, but they didn't have quite the same access that we had. This was simply a matter of seniority, I guess. The embassy, I guess, felt they could control these three angry young men, but maybe not these two angry older men. I don't know. Anyway, we managed to shake things up a bit down there, and later we did get permission to go get shot at. (Laughter)

G: Did you go get shot at?

B: Oh, yes, yes, of course. We all did, actually. We could hardly wait.

G: What keeps a reporter going back to get shot at?

B: Not every reporter goes back to get shot at. I guess those with--I've always suspected that there were some foreign correspondents I know

that had a sort of a death wish. I think that there are a good many of us who have a bit of the death wish in us. I think Graham Greene is a great example of a man with a death wish. Of course, he's living to a ripe old age and still producing books about every year or so. But I think that there is some of that in us.

And then also I feel that if you've been in the service, particularly, that you feel that once American soldiers are committed, American troops are committed to combat, you feel that you have to sort of share the hardships and take the chances. I think that's the way I felt about it, that you can't do it--and I felt much more strongly about that in Korea than I did in Vietnam, because I had been in the Marine Corps in the Pacific. I knew what it was like; I knew you could get killed. I was covering the Korean War; I knew you could get killed there, but that still was different. I was much younger. You get more conservative about exposing yourself as you get older, of course, and so--well, so far as I was concerned, I was not trying to make myself a reputation in Vietnam as a war correspondent, because whatever reputation I had to make had already been made. And I'm not sure that in retrospect maybe they should have had somebody else out there besides me. I used to go out, from time to time, when there were engagements that I considered worthy of my attention, but I was not trying to prove anything.

G: Well, let me take a specific--you may not have been in country, but on New Year's Day, or very closely thereafter, 1963, there was a battle which became famous afterwards, the battle of Ap Bac.

B: Yes, I was in Tokyo when that happened. Neil Sheehan and Dave Halberstam were down there. I guess Mal Browne was, too, I'm not sure.

G: It became a cause celebre.

B: Yes, that was the bad day at Ap Bac, as [inaudible] call it.

G: Did you cover LBJ's visit--

B: Yes, I did.

G: --when he was vice president, in 1961?

B: Yes.

G: What do you remember of that?

B: The first thing I remember is them landing at the airport, and some of the correspondents getting off, some of those guys I knew were traveling with him, saying, "Is it safe?" (Laughter) I said, "I think so, yes."

G: Was that when the 707 was still making the real steep approach in to Tan Son Nhut?

B: Yes, well, actually, it was very quiet in Saigon. That was 1962, wasn't it?

G: Yes, May 1962 [1961].

B: May 1962, yes. Yes. I covered that. You want just random recollections?

G: Whatever you--sure.

B: Fritz Nolting gave a dinner at the Majestic Hotel for LBJ, and the Vietnamese were playing host to all the correspondents and they

took them down to a restaurant, the My Canh restaurant, a floating restaurant on the Saigon River.

G: The one that got bombed?

B: Yes, the one that later got bombed. I was sitting in the Majestic Hotel bar, the upstairs bar off the dining room, having a drink all by myself there, and a guy comes out and looks at me and he said, "Are you Keyes Beech of the Chicago Daily News?" And I said, "Yes." I still don't know how in the hell he knew me, but it was Horace Busby. He was LBJ's press secretary, as I recall, at the time. And he said, "Come in here. The Vice President wants to talk to you." And so I go into the dining room hallway. LBJ is sitting there, and he says, "Move over, Fritz." (Laughter) The Ambassador moves over and makes way for me to sit down, and Johnson says, "Now tell me what's really going on here, son."

(Laughter)

And I said, "Well, could you be a little more specific, Mr. Vice President?" I forget what we talked about. But he was worried, Johnson suddenly began to worry about where his press was.

G: He'd lost his entourage.

B: He'd lost his press. These Vietnamese had stolen them and taken them down there for dinner, and he wanted to make sure that--

(Laughter)

G: That's very typical.

B: That's the explanation I got later for why I was hauled out of the bar. I'd been to the My Canh before, and I thought I might pick up

something just by hanging around. As a matter of fact, I did pick up a few nuggets from some of the things that LBJ had to say.

Well then the next day, as I recall, while he was there, they had this lunch for him at the Caravelle Hotel in which Johnson, as you no doubt have heard, referred to Ngo Dinh Diem as the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia, which gave us all a good chuckle. I think I wrote a sort of an editorial lead, shall I say, that "Ngo Dinh Diem woke up today to find that he was the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia. Nobody could have been more surprised," or something like that. It was not a straight news lead. I don't know whether I got away with it or not. And Madame Nhu was scribbling suggestions on pieces of paper, things that LBJ might want to incorporate in his speech and so forth. I don't know where he got that Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia line from, whether that was his own idea, or whether it came from her, or where it came from, but he said it.

G: Did he believe it, do you think?

B: I don't know whether he did. That would have been up to the correspondents or the people who were traveling with him to say. But I didn't really know the man.

G: Do you remember any of the correspondents who came out with him? Did you talk to any of them about the trip?

B: Yes, there are several I knew. One of them, I know, was Bob Vermillion, who was traveling with him for Newsweek. Bob Vermillion is living out on the coast right now in California; he's retired and living out there. Gosh, there were others--he's the only one whose name I remember.

It was during that trip that that famous story about--I'm sure that everybody has heard who has ever been near Vietnam about they were driving out to Bien Hoa to see this airfield and this new highway. Well, you've heard the story, I won't repeat it.

G: The little old lady who says, "I didn't do it?"

B: "I didn't do it," yes. Whether that story was true or not, I don't know, but it's a great story.

G: Did you know Cormier?

B: Frank Cormier? Yes, I knew him.

G: He was on that trip, wasn't he?

B: Well, he might very well have been. He later covered the White House, and I guess he covered it when--yes. Well, he covered it for a long time. So Frank must have been on that trip, yes. I imagine he's around here somewhere.

G: I haven't talked to him, but he's got a book out, of course.

B: Oh, he has?

G: It's not a brand-new book. It's about his covering the White House.

B: [Inaudible]

G: I want to ask you about the coup, but we're about out of tape, and I want to change the tape.

Tape 2 of 2

G: Mr. Beech, can you tell me about the perspective from which you viewed the coup that overthrew Diem in November of 1963? Where were you when [inaudible] came in?

B: Well, to my great embarrassment, I was back in Tokyo, where my family was at that time, and I immediately got the next plane to--

G: You said that you had been there just a couple of days before.

B: Yes, just a few days before. Then I'd gone back to Tokyo.

G: So obviously you had no good reason to believe it was coming.

B: Well, I knew that something was going to happen, but I didn't know when it was going to happen. I'd been away from my family for several weeks, and so I went back to sort of touch base with home plate. So I got caught. That's one of the hazards of the business. And [I] got back there--I think the coup was on a--was it a Tuesday? I'm not sure. In any event, I tried to reconstruct the events, because that was what was required at this point; everybody knew that the two men were dead. And I got in to see [Henry Cabot] Lodge, I think it was the day after I got back to Saigon, and I was still working on the reconstruction. I remember going in to see Lodge and I said, "Well, it looks as though some changes have been made around here." He said, "Yes, yes." He was rubbing his hands, you know, and a big smile, and then he said, "Too bad about those two poor men," and so forth. And I said, "Yes." My impression was that Lodge couldn't have cared less about those two poor men. I don't think that really Lodge cared much about the Vietnamese. He was there to do a job, and he did it, after his fashion.

G: Was his job to get Diem out of there?

B: Well, you get a lot of argument on that, of course. That's what he

considered his job to be, yes. And of course, when he got that cable from Roger Hilsman--

G: The famous August 24 cable?

B: Yes. He chose to interpret that as "get rid of Diem." That's what he wanted. I remember Lodge saying before this, during the waiting period, when we were waiting for something to happen, Lodge told me one day that "the trouble with this place is nobody around here has a lust for power," meaning why don't some of those generals do something, you know.

G: How was Lodge with the press?

B: Well, that's interesting. My own experience was he was very good with the press. He was very accessible, and I had heard, as did other members of the press corps out there, about his negative relationship with the press back here as a political candidate, particularly in 1960. Apparently his press relations back here were not too good. Out there they were, I think on the whole, quite good, because he still hoped to be president, you know, and I felt--I asked him one time, "Why did you come out here anyway? This is a very hot spot." And he said, "Well, I was too young to retire and too old to play touch football." That was his stock answer to that question of why. And he said, "The President of the United States offered me this job, and so I accepted. You don't refuse the president of the United States."

G: You hear that a lot, don't you? You don't refuse the president of the United States.

B: Yes. Well, I think that Lodge had his own reasons, and I think that they were purely political and he was playing the game. And I suppose, too, there was that sense of noblesse oblige, because he was a Lodge, you know. And he was one of the Boston Brahmin, and you know, you must serve your country, that part of the tradition. I suppose that there was some bit of that, although I must confess a great deal of cynicism about Lodge's motives. I saw him toss people aside if he felt that they were a liability to him, and he'd dump them like that.

G: Can you name somebody he did that to?

B: Yes, I can name somebody. Mike Dunn, who was a lieutenant colonel he brought out there as one of his aides and hatchet men, sort of. And then when Lodge got ready to come back to the States--he served two tours, you know, two short tours out there--he came back here to try to get the presidential nomination again. Or what was it when he left the second time? I'm not sure about that. Anyway, Mike Dunn, who's still around town here, I think, Mike went underground, because here he'd been left high and dry.

G: As a lieutenant colonel.

B: Yes, he was an army lieutenant colonel, a very political lieutenant colonel.

G: That's a very vulnerable position.

B: Yes, and I saw him on the street one day in Saigon, on Tu Do. He was wearing a sport shirt, an aloha shirt. I said, "Jeez, what are you doing? You're out of uniform and everything, Mike." He said, "I'm underground." (Laughter) He said, "It's the only thing to do."

(Laughter)

G: What happened there? You said that he discarded him, or--

B: He just left him high and dry. He was known as Lodge's hatchet man, and Lodge just left without taking him with him, affording him any protection, or anything of the kind. So he was highly vulnerable; everybody was after him. (Laughter)

G: All the enemies he'd made under Lodge?

B: Yes. And then this other guy, another instance. I'll have to--well, I'll have to not give the guy's name, I guess, but he was fairly high up in the embassy. There was a big political crisis--this was in the middle sixties, and this guy had backed a proposition that said it was a sensible thing to do, and it caused quite a dustup. Ky was prime minister at the time. This fellow was a good friend of mine, I'd known him in other places, and I went over to see him one evening at the Embassy. And I said, "You know, a lot of people have got their knives out for you. People have been asking about you from Washington, just what was your role in this?" And he said, "Well, I'm not worried. They're not going to get me or anything like that." I might as well tell you, his name is Phil Habib. He wasn't quite as well known then as he is now. I'm blowing his cover. But anyway, Phil said, "They're not going to get the old Brooklyn knife fighter. Besides, I've got the Ambassador here behind me." And I said, "You know goddamn well that Lodge would cut his own grandmother's throat if it would get him off the hook," or some terrible thing like that. Phil looked at me for a moment, and he said, "You're right!" (Laughter)

Now that's the way I recall the conversation. Phil Habib, I am sure, being a distinguished diplomat and everything like that, would have a totally different recollection. But he's an old poker-playing crony.

G: I'll have to remember that. Did you know David Nes? He was Lodge's deputy.

B: David Nes?

G: He came in December of 1963, and left in June 1964, which may be an all-time record for deputy chiefs of mission.

B: Jeez, I ought to, if he was Lodge's deputy. I remember some of the other people that Lodge brought out with him; he brought Freddy Flott. (Laughter) I remember Freddy Flott. I remember Mike Dunn. This guy did not come with Lodge when he first came out?

G: No, he came in December. He replaced Trueheart.

B: Oh. I'm sure, you know, so many people came and went, he didn't--

G: He later went to Cairo, I think.

B: He did?

G: Yes.

B: I can't say that I knew him.

G: Just a shot in the dark. Okay, you came back to Saigon and started reconstructing.

B: I came back a day or so after the coup and tried to do the only thing that I felt I could do under the circumstances, and that was try to put the story together. Lodge gave me his version of events. And I said, "I understand that President Diem was on the telephone to you a couple of times wanting to know what your intentions were," and he

said, "Yes." I'm not quite clear what he told me in response to some of those questions, but it didn't throw much light on the situation. I was convinced that Big Minh [Duong Van Minh] was the man who was primarily responsible, of course, for this whole thing.

G: You told me off tape that while Robert Shaplen's account is the best published account, it is not a hundred per cent. Who knows the whole story?

B: I think it's in the classified documents of what went on. I know one person, whose name I will not under any circumstance reveal, whom I know has seen all those documents. And he says that Shaplen has got a lot of it, but he doesn't have all of it.

G: What doesn't he have, do you know?

B: I don't know, I don't know.

G: I'm trying to think of--

B: Shaplen, you know, working for the New Yorker, having a lot of time to research these things, not being a daily newsman and not being subject to following the daily news, and being in addition a first-rate reporter, political reporter, and a very meticulous researcher, I think Shaplen's account of what happened will have to be the definitive account until somebody redefines it.

G: Is it that Shaplen leaves things out or has things wrong?

B: Oh, no, I don't think that he left anything out that he knew. All I know is that this person says, "He doesn't have the whole story," and I trust this person.

G: It's an error of omission rather than commission.

B: It's something that he didn't know about, something he didn't know about.

G: Yes. Did you talk to Lou Conein about what had happened?

B: I think I did. I talked to a lot of people. I had a pretty good reconstruction, I think, on it. But for example, one of the things I had was that the original stories--the guys who were on the scene, I think some of them said that they escaped by an underground tunnel. Actually that wasn't the case at all, as we now know. They left in a car.

G: Out a side door.

B: Yes, out of a side door, and they were taken out to Cholon. I sort of retraced, for my own satisfaction, their steps, where they'd gone. They were sheltered by this rich Chinese, and so forth.

G: Do you think Big Minh ordered their execution?

B: I think so. I think so. I couldn't prove that. Bill Colby thinks--I think Bill Colby in his book on his life in the CIA--well, he has his own account. Bill wasn't there; Bill was back here by that time, 1963. He had been station chief there before. But he didn't have much use for Big Minh. I think he comments that Minh's role in the assassination of Diem--

G: Did you know Minh pretty well at all, or did you know him at all?

B: Big Minh?

G: Yes.

B: Oh, I knew him, but I can't say that I knew him very well. During the last few years before the fall of South Vietnam, we lived one or

two or three blocks from each other, and I used to go over to see him when I had--

G: He was out of things--

B: Very much so, yes. And of course he was in exile in Thailand for quite a while. Ed [Edwin F.] Black, who was a U.S. Army general--you know Ed?

G: I just wrote his name down a while back.

B: Yes, well, Ed Black was Big Minh's sponsor, sort of.

G: In Thailand?

B: Yes, well, he had known him, I think, first in Saigon. Ed Black was one of these sort of intellectual-type generals who never did much with troops but was good at writing think-pieces and so forth, and--

G: As long as his name has come up, let me ask you this question. It's not in context, but--there was an American in Thailand who was very big in the silk industry--

B: Jim Thompson [?]? Yes.

G: --who disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

B: Oh, yes. Yes.

G: Has he ever turned up? Has anything ever come to the surface about that?

B: Ed Black knew Jim Thompson quite well, as did an awful lot of people. Jim had many, many friends and acquaintances, more acquaintances of course than friends, and as a matter of fact, about a week or ten days before Jim Thompson went down to Malaysia and disappeared, why, I had

dinner at Jim's house, and Ed Black was among those present. And Dean Frasche, and--

G: What was that last name, sir?

B: Dean Frasche.

G: Would you spell that?

B: F-R-A-S-C-H-E, I think. He was a Union Carbide man, a very interesting man, a very nice man, very bright. And George Berlingeri [?], who was an Italian businessman who built up a fortune in Thailand. We were all having dinner at Jim Thompson's house. Berlingeri had just bought an interest in a newspaper, and he was looking around for an editor, and I was invited to see if I knew any editors. Anyway, that was the last time I saw Jim Thompson.

And Ed Black, who used to stay at Jim Thompson's house quite often--his headquarters I think were up at Korat or somewhere upcountry, and he'd stay at Thompson's house when he'd come up to Bangkok. He went down there to help do the search after Thompson disappeared but never found him. Nobody knows what happened to him.

(Interruption)

G: What was the reaction among the Vietnamese to the overthrow of Diem?

B: Well, the public reaction was one of great joy. All the bar girls demonstrated enthusiastically, and--

G: How did they demonstrate?

B: Well, I don't think that they were buying drinks on the house or anything like that, but they joined the demonstrations. There were a

lot of students. It was a joyous occasion, supposedly. There were parades.

G: Could Lodge have run for president of [South] Vietnam, as has been alleged?

B: Oh, I never got that impression, no. I don't think that the Vietnamese had really enduring loyalties.

G: There were stories that the population of Saigon took to the streets and so on and so on, and then there were stories that no, no, this was overplayed, that there was not that big a reaction.

B: I think the stories were overplayed, yes. Of course, on TV you can take fifty or a hundred people and make it seem like a huge crowd, if you want to. It depends on how you edit the film.

G: Exactly.

B: Could it have been the same time as--let's see, I remember being back in Washington about this time, and the Vietnamese were pulling down a statue of somebody. I was watching on TV from some hotel here. And Pete Kalischer was narrating this for CBS; he was there covering it. And down comes the statue, and Pete says, "Well, there it goes. Now, what this is going to do for the war effort, I don't know." (Laughter) I've mentioned it only to show you how evanescent, how fleeting, how really silly an awful lot of things were there, that went on. You know, this should be brought out--Americans took this was much more seriously than the Vietnamese did. We were all worked up into a lather about it, much more so than the Vietnamese.

G: Why is this so?

B: Because they were accustomed to all this sort of thing. Now when the war got really big, and a lot of people were getting killed, then they were much more serious. But we're talking about a period now that the Vietnamese--I wrote stories about this. The Vietnamese tried never to let the war interfere with their siesta. This is what used to drive these eager-beaver Americans up the wall when they'd first come out there. "My God, what do you mean, siesta? There's a war on!" The Vietnamese would look at them, "War? Yes, there's been a war on ever since we can remember." But the Americans always took it much more seriously than the Vietnamese did.

I remember--I'll tell you this story that will illustrate a lot. Back in the mid-sixties, when they were having those revolving-door governments, there was a coup practically every other day--it's only a slight exaggeration--a friend of mine and I went out to see some cabinet minister, and they said, "Oh, come on in." Both of us went in. These guys were all sitting around having a pipe of opium. Now, they weren't opium addicts; they were just sitting around having a pipe, passing the pipe around the way Americans would sit around and have a cocktail, something like that. And they were there sort of discussing the situation, a very relaxed atmosphere--

G: Couldn't be anything else, with a pipe of opium.

B: (Laughter) That's right. As I say, they were not addicts or anything like that, just as people who drink are not all alcoholics, but it was [inaudible]. As we drove away they were talking about "maybe we ought to send out for some girls."

(Laughter)

G: It's a little--it's not what you expect to--

B: Well, you know, I used to try to get some of this into my stories from time to time and did, but it never seemed to--even the editors back in Chicago weren't prepared for this sort of thing; they weren't conditioned, you know. For example, the GIs in Vietnam, you know, used to use the terms gooks about the natives. They still used it, of course, some of them, during the early part of the war, at least, and I'd put it into my stories, because that's what they said, and it told you something about the attitude. My office used to always cut it out. I kept putting it in, and they'd cut it down. (Laughter) It went on for a long time. Nobody won, except they cut it out.

G: I'm trying to remember if it appeared in Korea.

B: I used it in Korea, and my office said, "That's very bad; that's a terribly racist thing." I said, "Yes, I know, but that's what they say." It started in World War II, of course. Gook money, gook this, anybody who was different was a gook. In Korea there were good gooks and bad gooks. (Laughter)

G: In Vietnam it became slopes, I think.

B: Yes, I guess they did call them slopes. I don't remember--

G: Well, it evolved. Gooks was first, slopes came sometime later.

B: Yes, I suppose so.

G: Can you recall what you said--I don't know what you said; I haven't looked--or what you felt the outcome of this was going to be, the overthrow of Diem, the new coalition government of Minh?

B: I felt that Ngo Dinh Diem, with all of his faults, was really the only leader that the country had. And Dave Halberstam and Neil Sheehan used to tell me--I was still commuting between Tokyo and Saigon--they used to tell me about all of Diem's sins and so forth. And I said, "Well, no doubt it's true and so forth. But you know"--no, they said he had to go, they felt he had to go. Well, of course, they were not alone. And I said, "Well, if I've learned anything in my misspent years in Asia, it is that before you overthrow a government, you'd better make sure that you've got something better waiting in the wings." I wrote a story about the various coup rumors and so forth. I pointed out that they had a very corrupt ruler over in Thailand, Sarit [Thanarat]. Maybe he should be overthrown, too, and so forth, because he was corrupt and dictatorial and all that sort of business, and he was of course. He also happened to be very effective. Anyway, I think the story appeared in the papers the day before Diem was overthrown, making me look like an idiot, of course. (Laughter) But anyway, I felt that it was a mistake, because at least--it was the old business of the devil you know as opposed to the devil you don't know. And I think that that was one of our fundamental mistakes. It may have been that things wouldn't have gone any better if Diem had remained in power. Who knows?

G: It's unprovable.

B: It is unprovable. Colby I think would argue, of course, that it was terrible. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that he's a

Catholic and Diem was a Catholic president. But anyway, that's the way he feels.

G: [Robert] McNamara came out in December then. Were you there, or do you remember anything about that visit?

B: I think I remember--I think I covered all the McNamara visits, but--came out in December, after the coup?

G: After the coup, right, to sort of size things up and see what could be expected from the new regime. He came back with a very pessimistic report, as I recall, didn't like what he'd seen.

B: Well, there wasn't much to like. As a matter of fact, the generals pretty soon started quarreling among themselves, which was entirely predictable. I remember Sanche de Gramont [?]--whose name is Ted Morgan now, he decided to Americanize himself--Sanche was a very astute reporter, French-American. But he came out there from Paris. And he took in the situation very quickly, and he said, "This isn't going to last very long."

G: Was he an old hand in Vietnam?

B: No, never had been there before, I don't think.

G: But he had the French point of view.

B: (Laughter) He took one look around, and he knew. He was quite certain about it.

G: Speaking of French reporters, did you know any that left any lasting impression on you at the time? Francois Sully, for example? Did you know him?

B: Yes, I knew Francois, yes, quite well.

G: He got in trouble on a couple of occasions, as I recall.

B: Oh, yes.

G: Once with the Diems, and then later on, I think, he was persona non grata with the American embassy.

B: Yes, well, Francois was--I knew him first in Hanoi during the French-Indochina war, and then I did him a few favors up there, and I always liked Francois. He'd gone out there as a soldier in the French army. He'd taken his discharge in Vietnam and stayed on. Professionally, the best thing that ever happened to Sully was when Madame Nhu, I think it was, had him kicked out of Vietnam, and he'd been a Newsweek stringer there up until that point. Newsweek said, "Well, you can't do that to our man," so they made him a full-time correspondent and sent him off to Harvard for a year's study and then sent him back.

G: Polished him up and sent him back?

B: Polished him up and sent him back. Sully was a nice little guy; he was usually very cheery. But he was never destined to be a--he never quite made it as a professional journalist. He knew a lot, and he had a lot of sources among the Vietnamese, but I don't think he could write very well. And he still was a French citizen, and Newsweek was not about to make him bureau chief or anything like that. And I think that he resented, understandably, having other men come in, some of them younger than he, coming in Vietnam green, knowing nothing, and being put over him. And it was understandable on both sides. That's just the way it was.

(Interruption)

G: He was one of the controversial reporters, and sometimes his reporting itself was what was at issue, and sometimes Sully himself was what was at issue. And I wondered if you had any insight into that.

B: Well, one doesn't want to be critical of the dead, of course. I think that Sully sometimes was off-base on some of his reports, and then I think that very often he was right. He usually had a different twist on a story from what other people had. I didn't see--if you asked me for a specific story now, I could hardly mention one. I do remember a story he did out of Phnom Penh one time when he wrote about the Queen Mother being engaged in running a string of brothels or something like that, which caused him to be unwelcome in Cambodia for a long time. I wouldn't give Sully bad marks. I mean, a lot of people wrote stories that weren't wholly true, and not always through their own fault, not always because of lack of trying or anything like that. I remember him as a very pleasant fellow. He remembered--I had helped him--he was a stringer for Time in Hanoi, and he used to come to me with his stories sometimes to ask to help with his English, and it was easier for me to rewrite the story than it was--I think I told you about that before, yes. Well, I don't want to go into that. But anyhow, we were friends. Beyond that I wouldn't--

G: You mentioned Frank McCulloch. Did you know him pretty well?

B: Yes. I think Frank was one of the best men that we had in Vietnam, best correspondents there. He was a Time-Life bureau chief there. Of course, he's at the Sacramento--

G: Sacramento Bee now, I think.

B: Yes. He's been there for quite a long time now. But Frank I felt was a very able, energetic correspondent.

G: How about the young generation of reporters that created so much controversy, the Halberstams and Arnetts and Sheehans and so on?

B: You mean as opposed to people of my generation?

G: Is there a generation gap?

B: Oh, yes, very much so. I think in that sense that all I could say is that we're all products of our times and our environments. If I had been Neil Sheehan or Dave Halberstam and not long out of Harvard, I probably would have reacted to that story as they did. But I wasn't, and as I used to tell them sometimes--we'd get into a discussion of Ngo Dinh Diem, and I'd say, "But look, you know, I was writing nasty stories about Ngo Dinh Diem when you guys were still at Harvard. It isn't that I want to be put in a position of defending the man all the time, but I'm just saying, 'What's the alternative?'" Of course you always end up, "If not Chiang Kai-shek, who?" "If not Ngo Dinh Diem, who?"

G: Was the answer "anybody would be better than Ngo Dinh Diem"?

B: Well, as I say, memory is self-serving, but I think that that was approximately the answer. You've got to get rid of him.

G: So we did, and we got Minh and Tran Van Don, and--

B: Yes, and all the rest of them.

G: And then three months later we got [Nguyen] Khanh. Had you known Khanh before he came in?

B: I had not known him before, but I knew I had the inside story on the coup, his coup, which we engineered, of course. He was a guest at the white house, which was the colonels billet down near the palace, and that's where he ran his coup from that night, and so forth.

G: You say we engineered it.

B: Well, yes. I mean the Americans did. We decided that--I say we, I mean the American mission decided that he was the boy.

G: He was a favorite of [Maxwell] Taylor's, was he not?

B: Well, I don't know whether he was a favorite of Taylor's or not. I don't think, frankly, that Taylor cared much for any of them as people, but as Alex Johnson once remarked, "The problem here is the quality of the people we have to deal with."

G: That's a good--what did we have to build from in Vietnam?

B: Damn little, my friend. That's the reason why--I remember after one turnover in government I went over to see Alex and I said, "Well, what's the lesson for this week?" "The lesson for this week is the low caliber of the people we have to deal with." Well, that may not be a precise quote, but that's what he meant, anyway.

G: He's in town still, isn't he?

B: Oh, yes, very much so. He's out at--Alex lives right over here on Connecticut. He's in the telephone book--U. Alexis Johnson. If you don't have his number, I have it at home. I think he's in the book; I'm sure he is. Still quite active. He's got his memoirs coming out sometime soon.

G: Oh, he does? Well, I'll be looking forward to that.

B: Should be interesting. I was asked at one point about five years ago to do them for him, and I declined, not because I don't like Alex, but I just didn't want to get involved in writing somebody else's memoirs. I thought mine might be more interesting.

G: Was it going to be one of these "U. Alexis Johnson with Keyes Beech"--?

B: Yes, that was the idea, but I just wasn't interested in it. I wasn't interested in doing anything at that time and was sort of thinking about what I was going to do, and so forth. Anyway, he found--I understand they are coming out soon.

G: Shall we break it here?

B: Yes.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II

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