

INTERVIEWEE: CLARK CLIFFORD (Tape 3)

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

July 14, 1969

M: How many requests for offprints have you gotten for that famous article in Foreign Affairs that you were looking at there?

C: I think I've probably sent out 600. My mail now must be--first it was in the tens, then it was in the hundreds, I think it must be in the thousands by now. I never saw anything quite like it.

M: I think that's destined to be one of the articles they refer back to, historians refer back to quite frequently, that's a good estimate or good reaction.

We stopped last time in the middle of some discussion on Vietnamese events in which you indicated you were fairly saturated at the current time. You indicated that the second Wise Men Meeting, the one in March of 1968, had definitely been your idea whereas the first one had not been. Did you have some reason for thinking the outcome of this second one might be different from the first one?

C: I had two reasons for making the suggestion. Of course the President receives a lot of suggestions, some he adopts, more often he declines the suggestions. In this particular instance I do recall at one of the regular Tuesday luncheons when we were engaged in this reexamination and reevaluation of our posture in Viet Nam, I had the feeling at the time that it would be very valuable to him to meet with the same group with whom he had met before--that had been perhaps in October or November of 1967. He'd gotten a great deal from the meeting, the fact that out of a group of eleven or twelve men who had met toward the end of '67 only one, that is George Ball, expressed opposition to the continuation of our policy in Viet Nam, had comforted him a great deal. He felt sustained and fortified by the judgment of these so-called senior advisers.

So the first thought I had was, we were going through this rather difficult debate, it seemed reasonable because some were urging a change in the President's position for him to ascertain if this senior group felt the same way, or had changed their minds--or some of them might have. I did know, and it is entirely possible that the President knew, that there was some new thinking on the part of at least some of them. I knew that Dean Acheson and McGeorge Bundy were in the process of reevaluation; that Tet had had a substantial impact upon the thinking of both of those men. I knew that not because I had sought them out to ascertain it, but in mere casual contact, either seeing them at a reception or talking with them at luncheons on some other subject, I'd received the impression that they were going through a period of reevaluation. The President considered that thought, and I believe the next I knew of it was when the President had

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informed Walt Rostow that the President did wish to take this course of action and Walt called me to advise me the date and time and place that the meeting would occur and all the details.

M: Was it organized, or did you organize it differently than the one that had organized in late 1967?

C: No, the fact is I did not organize either one of them. I'd been invited to the first one and took part in it, and went along with the majority view in 1967, without raising a question at the time. Tet had had a very substantial impact on me as it had on others. The first meeting of the senior advisers, I'm almost sure, came after the return visit of Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland. They had come back, it seems to me maybe a week, two weeks, or three weeks before the meeting of senior advisers in '67, and those two men had been quite optimistic about our posture in Viet Nam. As I recall, Ambassador Bunker said that "we could now see light at the end of the tunnel," and General Westmoreland indicated that he thought it entirely possible that we could begin to bring American boys home in 1968. Well, Tet changed all that. The fact that the enemy could mount a simultaneous offensive against fifty or sixty cities, towns and hamlets at one time and that the effect of such an offensive, even though blunted militarily, could result in our military asking for an additional number of troops amounting to over 200,000, changed the complexion entirely. After Tet, I assure you, there was no suggestion that we could see any light at the end of the tunnel, nor was there any thought of sending any American boys home. The whole thrust was exactly the reverse. After Tet the actual request that was made was that we send over 200,000 more out there to help the 525,000 we already had there.

With reference to the organization of the first group, I had nothing to do with that, all I knew was that the President had come up with the idea and I was invited. I wasn't in government then, I was just one of those who was considered in the senior group. However, so much had happened between the time they met, which may have been October or November, and toward the middle of March, and so much had changed because of Tet, that I remember specifically thinking that it would be valuable to the President if he called this group in again to see whether or not Tet had had the impact on these men that I knew it had had on me and had on some others within the Administration. So after having made the suggestion, he then decided, perhaps others made it to him, I don't know, or he may have been thinking of it himself, but he then decided the manner in which he wanted it to be held. He's the one who decided who he wanted, I had nothing to do with that, and he's the one who decided the manner in which they would come in and meet together first that evening at the State Department for dinner and be briefed and how he would see them the next day. All those details the President handled himself.

M: Did the advice change? Was it as unanimous the second meeting the opposite direction as it had been the first meeting--

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C: No, it was divided. There were a number, however, who had changed opinion. Keep in mind, making it relatively simple, let's say there were twelve, and the first time as we discuss the whole matter after the first senior group, I know Mr. George Ball who was Under Secretary of State was one of those present, the vote was about 11 1/2, to 1/2, because even George Ball did not level too determined an attack on the attitude of the others. He did raise questions and he was performing more in the capacity of the devil's advocate.

The second time, after the briefings and all, it would be my estimate that Dean Acheson had changed his mind, McGeorge Bundy had his, Cyrus Vance had changed his mind, Douglas Dillon had changed his. I think at the first meeting, I can't be sure but I believe we did not have Matt Ridgeway, General Matt Ridgeway at the first meeting, but I think he came in at the second meeting and he had great misgivings about our posture in Viet Nam. Art Goldberg had not been at the first meetings as I remember, but he was at the second meeting, and he was strongly opposed to the continuation of our policy, that is, the adding of more and more men.

That was, to a great extent, one of the major issues. Should we continue on with the policy that had already been adopted, that is, of putting more men in at any time that the military asked for them. There were still some who adhered to the same position that they had before. I would say that General Maxwell Taylor had not changed, Ambassador Robert Murphy had not changed, I think Justice Fortas had not changed in his attitude, so that--I know you'll have the specific records on it--but if there were twelve at the first senior advisers meeting, there may have been fourteen or fifteen at the second. Whereas it had been say eleven to one at the first, it seems to me the vote had shifted and if there were fourteen the second time the vote would have ended up something like ten to four the other way, so--

M: That's a substantial change.

C: Oh, you could just feel it, you could just sense it, it was just a great big swing all around from an almost unanimous belief in the rightness of our cause in the first group and a substantial shift in the meeting of the second group, the thrust of which was that we should not continue to pour blood and treasure into Viet Nam but that we should give the most careful consideration to seeing if we couldn't find some way to negotiate ourselves out of Viet Nam. Putting it another way, the consensus of opinion of the senior advisers in the first group was that military victory was attainable. By military victory I mean that we would through force of arms pressure the enemy into some kind of favorable results. It was the consensus, I believe, at the second meeting of the senior advisers that military pressure was not going to gain the disengagement which we really should begin to think about seriously.

M: In between those two meetings, you had given some testimony to the Senate, I believe,

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regarding the meaning of the San Antonio formula as you saw it.

C: I did.

M: Was there genuine division in high places in government about the conditions under which we would actually go to the negotiating table in the pre-Tet period there?

C: Yes, very briefly on the San Antonio formula problem, I came back from that trip that General Maxwell Taylor and I made in the late summer and early fall, late summer I guess it was of '67, disturbed and worried at the lack of feeling of immediacy or concern on the part of our allies. Here we were in the United States taking the position that we could sacrifice the lives of American boys in South Viet Nam because our national security and our national interest were so vitally involved there, that if we did not make this sacrifice, other nations would very likely fall under Communist rule and that could spread throughout Southeast Asia down in the sub-continent of India and Pakistan and out into the Western Pacific to the Philippines and Indonesia and then to Australia and New Zealand, and if it were to occur in that manner then the safety of our country and the safety of our ships throughout that area would, of course, be vitally affected. In that trip that we'd taken, I wondered quite a lot, I started off wondering after a first visit or two and ended up with a deep concern over it.

Some illustrations. The President wanted us to go to the Philippines to talk to President [Ferdinand] Marcos about what more he was going to do. When President Marcos got word that we were coming, he got a message to President Johnson saying he preferred that we not come at all. Now, mind you, we didn't mean anything, but we were personal emissaries of the President of the United States and President Marcos said, no, he did not want us to come at all, because it would be unwise politically from the standpoint of the Philippines. Now the Philippines, although only 700 miles from South Viet Nam, whereas we've over 7,000 miles, they had not sent a single combat man to South Viet Nam and to this day they've not sent a single combat man. They did send engineering corps and a hospital unit amounting to some two thousand men, but because of the pressure within the Philippines, they've now drawn them down until they may have only a thousand or twelve hundred. They haven't had a real combatant in South Viet Nam; this makes a man wonder. Thailand, which has a population of thirty million people and is a very short distance from Viet Nam, it's just over Laos and Cambodia, they had only two thousand troops there, and when we suggested that they might want to consider more, oh, my Lord! They had a list as long as a man's hopes as to why they couldn't send any more. They finally did send an additional light division, some six thousand troops, but we had to arm them, equip them, train them and also deliver a substantial amount of other equipment to the Thais in order to persuade them that it was in their own best interest to send some more men to South Viet Nam.

M: Even six thousand.

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C: Even six thousand. Today they've got eight thousand men there out of a population of thirty million people. The attitude was, well, if you feel that this would be helpful to you, Uncle Sam, we'll consider it, it's going to be rather costly to you.

M: If you want to buy it--

C: Sure, if you want to step up and pay for it all, I guess we can manage it. What proved to be such a shock to me was that it was our war! And if we were to get the help of the nations most intimately involved why we certainly have to look at the quid pro quo on it, because otherwise they would find it very difficult to help us. I had started off with what was probably the rather ingenuous and unsophisticated thought that we were helping them.

M: It was their war!

C: It was theirs, you see, and we were helping them because they were the first line and we were assisting them, but it didn't turn out that way. We went on to Korea; spent two days there. They do have a substantial investment in South Viet Nam, maybe 50,000 troops. We thought that they might do better than that, and their attitude was, well, they were under more pressure from North Korea. They did, however, consider sending a civilian group that would number as many as 5,000 to 10,000 civilians who would take over a number of tasks that were then being performed by the military--supply and logistic functions, maybe road building functions and all that--but they would do that only if we paid them.

M: Again, if you can buy it you can get it.

C: Right, if we paid them and the price as I remember was very steep for what we would pay these persons per day if they sent them over there. I felt a sense of growing concern and even some discouragement. I thought, well, when we get to Australia and New Zealand, things will be better. I remember we started early, about nine o'clock one morning, at the home of the Prime Minister. He had the chief members of his Cabinet there, and we stayed in session all that day, ended up having dinner together. We were together I guess until eleven or twelve that night. And Prime Minister Holt was thoroughly competent, a gracious gentleman, as all the others were.

He was prepared for us. He had a thick brochure [which] must have been an inch and a half thick. We would raise a point, and he would turn to a certain letter and there held have a complete answer to the point that we raised. They indicated that they might give some consideration. I did not bring this up at the time because it seemed impolitic, and I certainly didn't wish to be rude, but I knew that in the second World War, Australia which then, in the second World War, had only a population of eleven million, at one time had 340,000 troops in the various theatres of World War II. At the time we were there

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they had 7,000 troops in South Viet Nam. Now since that time I think they've added two thousand more, so I think maybe they have 9,000 now as compared to 340,000 that they had in the second World War when they were a much smaller nation. They're almost twice the size now, it seems to me, or 50-60 percent larger.

Then we got over to New Zealand, and I knew that having looked it up that New Zealand had 70,000 troops in the second World War. They had 500 troops in South Viet Nam.

M: Hardly a vital interest.

C: They only have 500 now!

M: Right.

C: And I wondered as I flew back from New Zealand whether or not the attitude of the countries represented their evaluation of the comparative danger to which they were subjected in the second World War as compared to the danger that confronted them in the South Vietnamese War. I assumed that it did because they rose up when the Japs were on the march and made this enormous contribution from a rather small population and yet when the South Vietnamese War started, which was by some interpreted to be the beginning of the fall of a long line of dominos, I could not find any sense of urgency, no feeling of emergency that they ought to get men over there and stop this conflict before it reached their shore. New Zealand with 500 men--that was just a token force, you see.

So I came back concerned at that time, concerned as to whether or not these nations who were much more familiar with that part of the world than we, might not be looking at it entirely differently than we, and it put the question in my mind whether possibly they were right and we were wrong. We'd been approaching it from the standpoint that our national security was involved. That's really the only basis on which you can ask American boys to go to another country and die. And these nations were sending very few men and the men they sent were taking a very limited part in any combat in South Viet Nam.

M: And many times we were paying them.

C: And we were making a very substantial contribution in a number of ways to those nations who were sending some men.

M: Now was this before the San Antonio formula, when you returned? This hadn't yet been delivered, is that right?

C: Right. I got back, I guess the end of July or early August. I think the San Antonio speech

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was made in October.

M: I believe that's right.

C: And in it the President stated, in his speech in San Antonio, that he was ready to stop the bombing and that he would assume that the enemy would not take advantage of a cessation of the bombing, because if they did so, it could increase the jeopardy of our troops that were there, particularly those that were in I Corps or in the northern part of South Viet Nam. I remember feeling a sense of very real encouragement. I got a great lift out of the San Antonio speech--I had nothing to do with it--I think I did not even see an advance copy. But I got a great lift out of it because it indicated that the President was directing his attention toward an amicable settlement of the matter rather than continuing on for a military victory.

Now with reference to that portion of the San Antonio formula there began to grow up an interpretation in some quarters, both at the State Department and within the White House, the interpretation that if the President stopped the bombing of North Viet Nam, then North Viet Nam would have to stop sending men and material into South Viet Nam, that that would be the quid pro quo. I must say that that made no sense to me because the North Vietnamese had perhaps 120,000 men in South Viet Nam and to suggest to them that we would stop the bombing and they would have to stop sending supplies, that is, food, ammunition, material of war, replacements and all, in consideration of that, would in effect mean that they would abandon 120,000 men they had in South Viet Nam.

M: We wouldn't do it.

C: Of course we wouldn't do it and to assume that they would do it I thought was wholly unrealistic. So I appeared before the Senate Arms Services Committee in January, 1968, after my nomination had been sent up by President Johnson. I was asked then for my interpretation of the San Antonio theory. I stated that what I thought the President clearly had in mind was that if he stopped the bombing they would not take advantage of the cessation of the bombing by increasing the flow of men and material. I used the word that was picked up by a number of papers and all. I used the word "normal" that I thought the obligation on them was not to exceed the normal flow, and if that were done then that would be compliance on their part with his suggestions.

M: Had he ever made this explicit to you?

C: He had not. It was my interpretation because it seemed to me that that gave force and effect and reality to the San Antonio theory whereas the other interpretation I thought made it a nullity. Because it made it so unreal from the standpoint of possible acceptance as to make it valueless, so I think possibly I used that question as an opportunity of

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projecting my view which I honestly thought was the President's view. I later learned that my answer at that time caused considerable consternation in some quarters in the White House and in the State Department.

M: That was my next question. That's about the time the press began its reporting which it continued on about the differences between your advice and Secretary Rusk's advice. How much substance and how deep did that tension get before the end?

C: As far as interpretation of the San Antonio theory is concerned, after having made that statement in January, I later learned that same day or the next morning that State was very put out about it, and that there were some in the White House who thought that this statement had not correctly stated our policy. However, I noted with interest although I was not in contact with anybody, I think the day after I'd said it, a statement was issued by the spokesman of the State Department saying, "Yes, this was the correct interpretation," and then some statement came out of the White House saying, "Yes, this was the correct interpretation." So I was gratified at that, so that I wouldn't start in with a controversy already on my hands.

You talk about my relationship with Secretary Rusk. A word on that. I worked with Secretary Rusk back in the Truman Administration. I served in the White House from 1945 to 1950. During part of that time, my recollection is, he was Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs or Southeast Asian Affairs, or whatever it was called then. I came into contact with him. I thought he was exceedingly intelligent; the times that we would need help from State and he came in, he was always enormously helpful, and I developed a very high opinion of his ability and judgment. He is a thoroughly dedicated, patriotic, intelligent American, who has made an enormous contribution. We were friends a long time; I still consider that we are friends today. The fact is, however, that I believe we disagree on Viet Nam. I believe he continued--or at least when we were last working together--I believe that he continued to feel just about as strongly as he had ever felt that our interest in Viet Nam really constituted our interest in Southeast Asia, and that if we did not see the war through in South Viet Nam that Southeast Asia could fall, and I think his feeling was that we would end up in a bigger and costlier and more deadly war later on if we didn't see this one through.

I got to the point where I differed almost 180 degrees with him in that regard. We had a number of debates before the President in the year 1968. Time and time and time again, conducted I think with the most gentlemanly consideration; I do not recall any of them ever becoming bitter or vitriolic. Neither of us made any effort when apart from the other to undermine the other's position with the President. I know I didn't, and I know that he didn't. I respected him as a man who'd made a great contribution. I thought in this particular instance, I thought that changes had taken place and that he was not giving sufficient importance to those changes. I think his attitude toward me to some extent was that I'd come in rather late in the whole picture; here these men had suffered through it for

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seven years before I'd gotten there; I didn't understand a great many facets of it that he and others understood, and I think that constituted his attitude on it.

M: What about the President? Did he let your advocacy of the different positions affect your relationship with him at all?

C: I believe it did, yes. In that regard I think that when he felt that Secretary McNamara was vacillating on Viet Nam and was becoming concerned about the efficacy of our bombing and was rather irresolute in our whole posture in Viet Nam, I think the President got concerned about that. And when the opportunity opened up for Secretary McNamara to go to the World Bank, it seemed to me there was rather general agreement that perhaps that was a good move. I believe one of the reasons the President selected me to succeed McNamara was that he felt I supported his policy strongly. I did support his policy and he had known me for a good many years, and I think what he wanted was a man who would stand there strong and forthrightly and resolutely and the President wouldn't have to worry about that particular fellow. He'd know right where that man was all the time. I was perfectly prepared to do that. The trouble with it was that as I went through that inquiry into the whole subject of Viet Nam my opinion changed.

M: You'd have been dishonest not to say so then.

C: Two days I believe it was before I went in as Secretary of Defense on March 1, 1968, General Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, returned from a trip to Viet Nam with the request of the military that 206,000 more men be sent over and additional helicopters be supplied and some other equipment. The President then named a task force to go into the subject of how these additional men would be provided and what the effect would be upon our military posture in this country and upon our economic position. So I recall being sworn in at the White House on the morning of March 1 and getting over to the Pentagon and getting the desk in operation, and I think it was that very afternoon that we started these task force meetings. And we went day after day after day. It was our function to provide the President with a plan showing the logistic means by which these men could be sent over. We were not to get into the discussion of whether they should be sent--

M: Not whether but how.

C: It was how. And we spent hours determining which units could be sent, what the mix would be, that is, how many Marines, how many Navy, how many Army, what the impact would be upon our reserves situation. Definitely we were going to have to make a substantial call-up of reserves. My recollection is now the plan contemplated a call-up of 280,000 reserves.

M: Substantial number.

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C: Very! We spent hours estimating what the impact would be on our economy. Secretary Fowler of Treasury was deeply disturbed by it; they were considering the possibility of the imposition of credit control and even possibly wage and price control.

M: Desperate measures, indeed.

C: Oh, very, very. I remember we got an estimate of what the additional costs would be of this kind of program, this was in March of '68, the estimate was that in the balance of that fiscal year which ended June 30, it would cost an additional two billion and for the fiscal year starting July 1, 1968, it would cost an additional twelve billion. Now this on top of the already enormous burden we were carrying, the dollar had gone through a period of vulnerability in the early part of '68, and in the spring this would put a lot more pressure on it, put a lot more pressure upon our balance of payments problem, which was already acute, so that all these matters began to come in that day by day caused me growing concern.

But what bothered me the most was the feeling of frustration and growing discouragement over what the future was in Viet Nam. I had the opportunity, to ask a great many questions on a subject I'd never gotten into before and as a quick illustration, one naturally would ask, well the military--by the military I'm referring to the whole Joint Chiefs, I'm not just referring to General Westmoreland, the request came really from the Joint Chiefs for this additional increment. I would naturally ask the question, Now if we send an additional 200,000 men will this do the job? Need we not consider sending any more? Well, nobody could tell me that that number would do the job. Well, so I said, We send this 200,000, can anybody give me any idea, even in their opinion, when we could bring the war to a conclusion on a military basis? Couldn't get an answer. Six months? Well, no, couldn't do it in six months. A year? No, that doesn't seem right. Two years? Well, we would have made a lot of headway in two years, but would we have concluded it? Well, nobody could say.

Well, here was just an open-end commitment that seemed to get us in deeper and deeper and deeper. We had long discussions and inquiries into air power. I concluded that with the limitations that the President naturally had set upon our conduct of the war so it wouldn't spread and inflame all through the whole area that air power would not limit the enemies' supply function sufficiently so as to choke them off. And finally I got down to the point of asking the Joint Chiefs, "What is our plan for military victory in Viet Nam?" Well, we got into long discussions, and I don't know how many times I asked it but finally it became very apparent and I think, maybe I worded it perhaps as tactfully as I could, but I said, "The fact is we do not have a plan for military victory." And that turned out to be the case. All that we had was the advice of the military that if we continued to pour troops in at some unknown rate and possibly in an unlimited number that for an unknown period of time that ultimately it was their opinion that the enemy would have suffered that degree of attrition that would force the enemy to sue for some kind of peace.

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- M: How quickly did you begin to relay this new impression to the President after you took office?
- C: I would think within eight or nine or ten days.
- M: By the middle of March.
- C: By the middle of March the debate was on in earnest.
- M: The reason I asked, one of the events that took place sort of coincidentally here was the Robert Kennedy-Theodore Sorensen suggestion for a peace commission of some kind that they asked you to relay to the President. Can you give some detail on that and what impact if any it had on the President's thinking?
- C: Senator Edward Kennedy phoned me late one night at home, it was about eleven o'clock. This is some time in the month of March, the dates of course will be very clear, and said that Senator Robert Kennedy wanted to come see me to talk about his concern about Viet Nam, and Robert Kennedy had discussed it with Edward Kennedy, and Edward Kennedy said, "Why, sure, what you ought to do, I'll be glad to call Clifford and make the appointment." So he made the appointment for some time the next day, maybe 11 a.m. or so. Senator Robert Kennedy arrived and he had Ted Sorensen which was perfectly all right with me. I'd known them both for a great many years. They came in, sat down, we had a few pleasant words, then the substance of the purpose of their call came out. Senator Robert Kennedy said he had been going through a very difficult and agonizing period which he'd been attempting to reach certain decisions himself, that he had a lot of people urging him to get in the presidential race. He felt that we should conclude our venture in some manner in South Viet Nam and that would be the only reason that he would get into the race. He'd said before that he wasn't going to get into it. He had meant it at the time, the only reason he would get into it would be if it was necessary in order to find peace in Viet Nam, that if President Johnson were willing to take a serious and forward step toward peace then Senator Kennedy would not have to get in it, that he would have accomplished what his candidacy might accomplish.

So I said, "Well, that's interesting," and then he and Ted Sorensen talking together said, "Well, if the President will appoint a commission to make a thorough investigation of Viet Nam and then report back to the President and if that could then be a public report," and although it was not quite so clear the strong presumption was that the President would agree to follow the recommendations of such a report, that Senator Robert Kennedy felt that if the President would agree to do that, then Senator Kennedy would have met his obligation to his country and he could advise all these people who are urging him to run that there was now no occasion for him to run because President Johnson was going to go ahead on a plan which he felt could very well lead to peace.

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- M: Was Senator Robert Kennedy envisioning a role for himself on this commission; did he make that clear?
- C: There was some ambiguity. I had a written memorandum with reference to that hearing, and it seems to me that there was some ambiguity. At one time earlier in the meeting I got the distinct impression that Senator Kennedy expected to be a member, but by the time our meeting ended, which may have lasted an hour or hour and a half, I got the impression that he thought better of it as he had thought it over while we talked. But they listed a number of persons who would have to be members of the commission. It wasn't that the President would appoint a commission of his own choosing; these were the men he would have to appoint and in effect he would have to abide by the decision on Viet Nam reached by these men hand-picked by Senator Robert Kennedy.
- M: So it did have overtones of an ultimatum in that sense.
- C: I was never in any doubt that what it was an ultimatum. It just seemed as clear to me as it could be. That if the President were to follow this course of action he would stay out of the race; if the President chose not to follow this course of action then, without saying it definitely, the inference was that the pressures would be irresistible on Senator Robert Kennedy to get into the race. So when it was over I phoned the President and said I would want to talk with him and deliver a full report on this matter. I made some quick notes after they left so I'd be sure to have all the different facets. I went to the White House about the mid afternoon, which was when the President was free to see me. We talked the matter over at great length, and the President's attitude was that this is just an abandonment of his responsibility as President of the United States. The President of the United States can't select a group of citizens--
- M: Chosen by somebody else.
- C: Hand-picked by somebody else, and apparently agree in advance that these men could come in, study a problem, make a recommendation which would in turn be the President's decision. The President obviously was just as right as he could be. You wouldn't need a President of the United States if that's the way our government worked.
- M: You'd run the government by committee.
- C: You'd run it by committee and by series of committees selected by different Senators in the United States Senate. So all the decisions would be made on that basis. So the President was very clear in his own mind, I think, right through the entire discussion, and it was talked out in great detail that he could not possibly continue to meet his responsibility as President and agree to any such offer; and whatever result might ensue from his refusal to comply with the suggestion, he would just have to face up to that. That is also part of the responsibility of a President of the United States.

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So I was instructed to call Senator Kennedy, or I think my instructions were to call Ted Sorensen, that's the way we had left it. Ted Sorensen said he would be in Senator Robert Kennedy's office and whenever I had gotten the President's answer I should phone him. I left the President's office, went to another private office, got Ted Sorensen on the phone. He was then in Senator Robert Kennedy's office, and he said, "Well, wait just a minute; Bobby is here, and I'll put him on an extension." So they were both on the phone when I reported to them the President's reaction, and I may have taken ten minutes or so to do it. I went through the President's reasoning right down the line, the result of which I thought to reasonably objective men was inescapable; but I wanted them to know that his rejection was not a casual or cavalier one, but that he'd given it thought and here was his reaction and here was his decision. They listened, they asked a question or two, and the general purport of their remarks is well, this is too bad because this would have been a way to have avoided what now appeared to be a major conflict and controversy that lay ahead.

M: This also coincides roughly with the time the speech of March 31 was prepared, and of course there's been considerable speculation in the press and elsewhere about the circumstances behind that. Perhaps you could clear up--

C: This was a good deal earlier, it seems to me, than that. Your file will show clearly. I think the visit from Senator Robert Kennedy must have come within the first two weeks of March; that would be my off-hand recollection.

M: So it would be the two weeks prior to the March 31 speech.

C: Whereas the speech, of course as you know, was on March 31. The early stages of the preparation of that speech which I suppose clearly is the most important speech that President Johnson made in five years, is shrouded in some mystery as far as I am concerned. It seems to me long toward the middle of March I had some consciousness that a speech was being considered. I certainly didn't see a draft. I think when I first saw a draft, which may have been the third week or fourth week in March, I think Harry McPherson told me it was the sixth draft of the speech.

I know we were thinking along the lines of the President reaching a decision and making a decision known to the American people because all this time there was pending the request of the military for this very substantial additional increment of troops, and the President was going through the process of thinking it out before reaching a decision. In the middle of March, sometime around the middle, maybe between the fifteenth and the twentieth or somewhere in there, the President made two speeches. One of them seemed to me was out in Iowa. One of them was some place else, and they were really very hard-nosed speeches. They were stern, they were facing up to the commitment that we had made, which incidentally, let me say parenthetically, I believe was another area of some disagreement between Secretary Rusk and me. He felt very strongly that we had a

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positive, inescapable obligation under the SEATO agreement to come to the aid of any signatory to the SEATO agreement or any protocol nation. South Viet Nam had not been a signatory but it was a protocol, and I never quite could get myself to go along with that. It was a different interpretation than the other signatories of SEATO placed upon that particular document.

Returning to the two speeches in the middle part of March, they were very determined speeches; we were to meet our responsibility, they were in effect, something of a restatement of our intention to seek and achieve military victory in Viet Nam. I was deeply concerned about those two speeches.

M: Do you know who wrote those, incidentally?

C: I do not, I do not.

M: I just wondered if McPherson--

C: No I don't know. I would think it was entirely possible that Mr. Walt Rostow had a hand in them because he naturally would. They would fall in his field within the White House, but I didn't ever remember seeing either of those speeches before they were made. But by the time those two speeches were made I had the strongest feeling that we ought to be moving in the other direction, and it looked as though this was the kind of setback from which, perhaps, we could not recover. I would say that in the last week in March I saw the first draft, maybe it was the week before, say the twenty-third, fourth or fifth of March. The speech I saw, the draft I saw, was a very hard speech.

M: Another in the line.

C: Another very much like the two that had been given around the middle of March. Determined, calling on the American people for unity behind this effort, an effort to justify the sacrifice of lives and treasure that we had already spent in South Viet Nam. And I was afraid that we were heading down that same road that we'd been going down. And I believed so deeply the time had come to get off that road and get on another road. So about three days before the thirty-first of March, again this has been written about, we met for a speech conference in the office of Secretary Rusk, and there were present Walt Rostow, William Bundy, Harry McPherson, Secretary Rusk, and I. I think we met about ten o'clock in the morning and the purpose of the meeting was to go over the speech and polish it and then later I suppose the next day or so I had a meeting with the President. As we got into the speech, it seemed to me to be more and more warlike. Again, it was stern and unbending and I remember taking the position on that occasion that I thought it would be a calamity for the President to make that speech.

M: Were you alone in that view?

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C: I had the feeling that Harry McPherson supported that view. In a meeting of that kind Harry could not speak out very well, as just an Administrative Assistant at the White House. But I remember stating that after we'd been through the whole speech and talked about it a good deal and instead of taking it up page by page, which was the plan, we just let it lie on the table and got into this very spirited discussion about what we hoped to accomplish--that is, what we hoped the President could accomplish--by the speech. And I recall making the statement that this was a speech about war, and what I thought the President should do was make a speech about peace. I now knew after what I'd gone through the preceding twenty-seven days, and I went into that in some detail, that we were headed down a road that had no end, if what we were going to do was go after military victory. I went into that in some detail, and I think it was persuasive and then here we were just talking about the President going further down that road, sending more men to Viet Nam. There's going to just be more American boys killed. I suggested that when we announced, as we would have to, another 200,000 were going, I thought that probably the enemy would match it, they'd put another 200,000 in, and the war machine would continue to crush and destroy these young men. Then we'd have to raise the ante and I guess they'd call us, and this was the road down which we were going.

So instead of our spending an hour or an hour and a half polishing the speech, I remember we stayed right there for luncheon and continued on with the debate on into the middle afternoon and the late afternoon. It was a curious, curious meeting and everybody got in it, everybody had a chance to say his piece and by the time that day ended I believe that speech had changed to where it was hardly recognizable. And Secretary Rusk, although deeply troubled by it, by the whole debate that had taken place, indicated his general approval of this shift in direction. That was enormously important, because I feel that President Johnson very likely would not have made the change in policy had not Secretary Rusk been broad enough and intelligent enough to have swung around on it. The idea was, McPherson was to work that night and get up another draft based on a lot of the discussion we'd had that day and he did so. And I think we met with the President the next day, and I think the President had two drafts by that time--

M: Excuse me. When did the idea for stopping the bombing above a certain point creep into this consideration?

C: It was discussed that day and there had been some previous discussion of it, and I felt it had been discarded. There'd been discussion all along about not sending any more men, cutting back the bombing, considering a number of different decisions that would indicate that the President was moving toward negotiation instead of continuing down the road of only military force.

M: But this was back in there by the time it got to a draft to the President the next morning?

C: It was in there, right. And the fact is we actually had it in the draft at one time that the

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twentieth parallel, that the President would stop the bombing north of the twentieth parallel and then State came along saying that was too clear-cut and would be too clear a signal, they could move right up to the twentieth parallel and then State's desire was that that language be not so clear, but that it be left in such a posture that we would have some degree of flexibility. I should have fought harder against that latter notion because it caused a great deal of confusion and almost got the whole affair off the track because of the different manner in which different people interpreted the language of the limited bombing halt. But finally by the time we got another draft and began to meet with the President there was coming into existence a degree of unanimity regarding the position the President should take that I think was very comforting to him. Any President is worried by differences between his senior advisers, and President Johnson was deeply concerned at the differences that existed between Secretary Rusk and me. Let me reiterate, those were not personal differences. They were, however, deep-seated differences in our attitude toward policy.

M: But if you can agree to recommend this course of action, I can see it would be very comforting.

C: This was comforting to him because we were able to report to the President, I think the next day, that we'd spent almost that other full day on the draft, that it was felt it was better to work on another draft rather than to try to go through that draft that had been handed to us, that there was now another draft. He had two drafts in his possession and it was recommended by both Secretary Rusk and me. He took the lead in this, that we devote our attention to what we'll call draft number 2. And that was done, the President accepted it, we went through lots of conversation about how we happened to agree on this, why this was that and so forth and so on, and that then became the speech.

M: After the speech was made and was favorably received by Hanoi, was there any question at all during the difficulties over arranging a site as to whether or not we would go ahead with the talks and get engaged in something serious with the North Vietnamese?

C: During that month that took us--there were mutterings and grumblings on the part of some that the talks were never going to lead anyplace and that it was a mistake to suggest even the lessening of military pressure on the enemy.

M: That's the important point through the rest of the period, really.

C: There were still those who felt, and I think to this day feel, that the only course of action was to keep the enemy under constant unceasing pressure militarily and that would finally force some type of capitulation. The trouble with that theory in my opinion was that that's what we'd been doing for so many years.

M: Really no change.

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- C: That's what we did, and started doing in '65 when we began to get troops in there in substantial number, we did it all through '66, all through '67, we started the same thing in '68. Then the Tet hit us and all, and I thought we'd had enough of that particular course of action. It had not produced results before despite the most sanguine and optimistic predictions from time to time by those who would visit Viet Nam.
- M: When the North Vietnamese reduced their military activity, for example, as they've apparently done again recently, during the summer of 1968, was there advice to the President to stop the bombing entirely then as a reciprocal gesture on our part?
- C: The enemy launched an August-September offensive in 1968. It really did not get off the ground. We had a good deal of advance information about it. General Abrams was very effective in keeping the enemy off-balance, but they started to mount this offensive and I think he just kept them in such a position that they really didn't ever get it started. After that so-called August-September offensive, they withdrew. They withdrew some units even back up into North Viet Nam; they withdrew some over into Laos and Cambodia. I know at that time Ambassador Harriman, who was in close contact with the North Vietnamese through Xuan Thuy and Ha Van Lau in Paris, thought then and still feels to this day that that was a signal that Hanoi was giving us that if we would reciprocate, then we might really begin to get some place in the peace negotiations. Now he reaches that conclusion because of the personal talks that he had and it's entirely possible that he's right. I don't know because I wasn't having talks with those men in Paris, we had to rely on his judgment, but in any event, there was no change in our posture in the fall of '68. The instructions to our military commanders were still to maintain incessant pressure on the enemy.
- M: Which you've said in your article that we talked about earlier should now be rescinded; was there a good reason for not rescinding them in the fall of '68?
- C: Well, yes. The fact is and this is a matter of interest, in the fall of '68 and through that summer, there were those who were urging the President to call a halt to this business in Paris. It was proving to be a snare and a delusion. No progress was being made they contended, which was correct. Hanoi would not even agree to permit a Saigon representative to sit at the table, and therefore we could not get into discussions of substantive matters; there were only procedural questions being discussed. So some became impatient and said this isn't getting anywhere. This is typical of the way Hanoi would handle it. This is a stall; they're getting a lot of benefit from this partial cessation of the bombing, they're building all their forces up, they're rebuilding bridges and roads and factories and so forth that had been destroyed, so this suits them fine. Now, let's recognize that we've been entrapped and let's get back to the bombing and let's turn the pressure on them again because that's the only way we'll get anywhere. So those of us who believed we were on the right course were fighting all the time to hold what we had gained, so that we might not slip back down the hill. We weren't making much progress

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going up the hill but we were fighting hard to hold that degree of progress that we'd already attained. Now then later on in October the discussions start and we had very spirited times then about stopping all the bombing.

M: The delay--you mention a three-week delay between the thirteenth and the thirty-first roughly, during which time Saigon was not wanting to come and so on, but was that delay perhaps longer than it might have been or could have been before the final halt was made. It's very important from a domestic political standpoint, particularly, that it took so long.

C: Yes, in there--let me give you this view of it. It was--perhaps the record shows--maybe it was the thirteenth of October for the first time Hanoi indicated through its representatives in Paris, that it was willing to permit a representative of the Saigon government to come in and join the conferences and that discussions of substantive matters could start. That was a great lift to us, we were all delighted. Finally the time had come after months and months--it went clear back to May--during which the parties had been going through the motions but no real progress.

Now there was a factor in there that does not seem important now but was really very important then. Hanoi wanted a substantial period of time to pass between the stopping of all the bombing in North Viet Nam and the beginning of substantive discussions. My recollection is they wanted two weeks--two or three weeks--to pass. The reason for that was they did not want the stopping of the bombing to be tied in with the beginning of substantive talks because they had said over and over a hundred times, you see, that you've got to stop the bombing without any understanding from us--

M: Unconditionally.

C: That's right. There will be no quid pro quo. If you once stop the bombing, then we will discuss with you what will follow then, but we'll make no agreement with you. Well, they finally decided they could reach an understanding with us but they didn't want it to appear as though those two important occurrences were connected. President Johnson on the other hand was placed in an impossible position by that, because we'd been saying all along that the bombing, certainly south of the twentieth parallel, was important in protecting our men, those up at I Corps. And he did not feel that he could stop the bombing and say absolutely nothing to the American people and have everybody say, "Well, what are you stopping the bombing for?" "Well, I just decided to stop the bombing," and then two or three weeks later announce, "Well, now we're going to start some talks." He felt he had to associate them. So the debate went on for ten or twelve days or two weeks in there. They say start with two weeks--he wanted twenty-four hours, he wanted to say, "I'm stopping the bombing tomorrow, Wednesday, and on Thursday the talks start," and they said, "No."

M: And ultimately that agreement was reached then.

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- C: Finally the agreement got down to the point--the record will show this--where he was going to stop the bombing on November 1 and the talks were to start I believe on November 6, which I think was the day after the election. And that's his coming up from twenty-four hours to five days, and their coming from two weeks down to five days. It perhaps seems a little foolish now, but it was not foolish then, because he wanted very much to get them to agree to permit Saigon to be present and to get the substantive talks started and this was a complete block to it because of their time factor.
- M: And nobody thought the South Vietnamese would throw a monkey wrench in at that point, is that right?
- C: The South Vietnamese were kept informed on a daily basis as to exactly what was going on. They knew every facet of it. As we began to make progress--by progress Hanoi began to say well, not two weeks, thirteen days, then twelve days, then eleven days--it's very difficult dealing with them. The Saigon government was kept posted all the time and as we were making progress we could begin to see that finally we're going to get to some point to where we could agree. So, a statement even was prepared for release in Saigon and release in Washington, exactly the same wording, announcing the day that the bombing was to stop and that the substantive talks were to begin and that the Saigon government was to have a representative there. And I remember specifically that they had some suggestion at the first about the wording and then it was all arranged and the only one other point they had was, would it be all right in our release in Saigon, if instead of saying the United States and the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, could we reverse the order and put the Saigon government first, and the United States second. And we said, "Sure!"
- M: A very minor point.
- C: Inconsequential. That was the only one point, and we said, "Sure, in our statement here we'd naturally put the United States first and the Saigon government second but in your statement you put the Saigon government first and the United States second." And as soon as the cables went back and forth on that everything was set and I had the feeling then that an exceedingly important major step had been taken and that the announcement would be made, then the talks were to get started and we were really headed down the right road, we were certainly off that other road we'd been on.
- M: Then it all blew up.
- C: It all blew up because the President was to announce this very important development on the evening of October 31 and it was either the late afternoon the day before or the morning of that day, somewhere along in there, suddenly out of a clear sky the Saigon government says no. It was the day before. They said, "No, we can't agree to the timetable," was their first excuse. And they said "the reason we can't agree to it is that we

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cannot get a delegation to Paris by November 6, so we can't agree to it so we must not go on with it." So the message shot right back there saying, "Well, that isn't important, you can let your Ambassador in Paris at least attend the first meeting, then pass it for a week or whatever period you want and get your delegation there." Which was an obvious answer, and to which they had no real reply, so they came back--the next cable my recollection is had three additional objections to it. One, they said on thinking it over we've decided that we must take this up with our National Security Council before we can agree to it. Second, we must not make this decision without recalling our Ambassador in Paris back to talk it over with him, and third, also on further reflection we think this should be taken up with the legislative branch.

M: Did our people think by this time there might, as has been alleged, some Republican activity in dealing with the South Vietnamese government, hoping to get them to take this delaying tactic?

C: At the very first, no. Within a day or two thereafter, it seems to me, evidence began to appear that the Saigon government was in contact with persons in this country who were persuading them--maybe the word is pressure instead of persuade--that this whole matter should be sabotaged. The man who knows that story in all its details and ramifications is President Johnson.

M: It came to him direct.

C: He got the information direct. He had talks with some leading Republicans that nobody else had, and the sensitive nature of that whole proceeding was such that I never did know all the details. I knew enough of it--I was told enough by him and others that a very determined effort was being made by certain elements in this country to sabotage the beginning of the substantive peace talks in Paris.

M: Is this other than the Madame Chennault one, which is fairly well known?

C: No, that's the one I am referring to.

M: That is the one, dealing through the Nationalist Chinese, I presume.

C: How she dealt I do not know, but it came to the President's attention that she was very much involved. Now in whose behalf she was acting, the President would be more likely to know about that than anybody else.

M: You have been quite patient, and I don't want to keep you much longer this afternoon, and on Viet Nam you've told me everything I think that's not in one of your several articles. You did make a number of speeches in 1968 sort of pressuring Saigon to come on and get the table shape business settled. Were any of those inspired by or cleared through

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President Johnson?

C: No, they were not formal speeches. Toward the end of 1968, I was deeply disturbed at what was taking place. We'd worked awfully hard to get the substantive peace talks going. They were the hope. They could end the killing in Viet Nam and here now the Saigon government was dragging its feet. First, when we were so anxious for them to send the delegation to Paris so we could get the talks started they delayed day after day after day, weeks went by, and they wouldn't even send the delegation. And all the time American boys were dying in Viet Nam. I went on a television program and I think I also had a press conference and in the press conference one might say I was critical of the Saigon government. It wasn't worded in such a manner, I think, as to be characterized denigrating but what I did was go through the facts with reference to the understanding we had with them, the details even of agreeing on the wording of the joint release and why suddenly without there being a recognizable excuse they decided not to send the delegation.

M: But you did this on your own authority?

C: I did it on my own and then even after they sent a delegation then they got there and day after day and week after week was spent on the shape of the table. So again I went to the TV medium and again, as I recall, I had a press conference and I think that maybe some of the wording was pretty stern about the fact that they couldn't agree on the shape of the table; and all during the time they couldn't agree on that, American boys were dying in Viet Nam and that we as a nation had to make up our minds about what our policy was going to be, and I did not think that we could get ourselves in a position where we were subject to a veto by the Saigon government, and that's the position we were in. This was a matter of the deepest concern to the Saigon government. They hated the appearances that I made and were very concerned about it--

M: President Johnson didn't object?

C: President Johnson at no time said he either approved or disapproved. When he was asked at a press conference one time, I think his answer was merely that "Secretary Clifford has a right to state his own views on matters of this kind." Vice President Ky of South Viet Nam was very disturbed. His answer was, "Well, this is typical because Clifford had shown a propensity for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time," and from his standpoint I'm sure it was. It is my hope that it helped the American people understand what I had come to see as clearly as any equation I have ever seen, and that is by the end of 1968 the goal of the Saigon government was utterly antithetical to the goal of the United States. One, the Saigon government did not want the war to end. Number two, they did not want the Americans to pull out. Number three, they did not want to make any settlement of any kind with Hanoi or with the Viet Cong or the NLF. They preferred it the way they were. With 540,000 American troops--they were in no danger whatsoever, and if we stayed

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there long enough ultimately perhaps we could exhaust Hanoi and then maybe they wouldn't have to make any settlement at all.

In addition to that, when you've got 540,000 troops in a country and thousands of civilians, it's just as though you had a golden pump running, and were pumping the money in there, and they certainly all liked that fine. And the whole concept was, don't let these fellows either get us to Paris, don't let the talks start, delay in every way you can, so that it is my conviction today that the Saigon government does not want to make any settlement. That's why I recommended in the article and that's why I'm absolutely convinced beyond doubt they will never try honestly to make a settlement with the enemy until they know we definitely are going to pull out and that's why I think it's important to tell them, "Here's our timetable, South Vietnamese, 100,000 combat troops out in '69, all the rest of our combat troops out in '70, and this is it no matter what. So now that you know it, get to work and make a settlement." And I believe that they have a very good chance of making a settlement but they'll never give any consideration to a settlement as long as there is some hope that a development will take place that will cause our country to say, "Well, I guess we'd better leave our troops there for awhile."

M: That's about as good a summary as I could think of you could give on Viet Nam, and that exhausts our interest in the Viet Nam topic.

(End of tape 3)

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By Clark M. Clifford

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