INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWER: TED GITTINGER

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Tape 1 of I

G: All right, sir, I hate to make you repeat yourself, but in Honorable Men, you wrote a good deal about the coup of 1960, and you have just said, although we didn't get it on tape, that there was a good deal of dissatisfaction in the military and so on.

C: Frustration, I would call it, more than dissatisfaction. Frustration that the enemy seemed to be getting away with acting the way he wanted. Let's remember we're dealing in the time frame of another military coup. 1961 was the coup in Korea, but there was one prior to that in Pakistan, where a group of colonels took over. Some place like that, I've forgotten where it was, and I think that was a little contagious. So that when you had a combination of the soldiers feeling a little frustrated that we weren't winning the war immediately, and some of the opposition politicians stressing their distaste for the [Ngo Dinh] Diem government, you had an atmosphere which did produce the attempt by the Colonel [Nguyen Chanh Thi] and a battalion or two that he had in an attack on the palace. Now, he had not thought through the thing. He didn't know where he was going. I think his basic motivation, as it came out later, was that he wanted to capture the palace and then secure the President's approval of a more vigorous program against, the enemy. In other words, not to overthrow the President, but to get him to go along with a stronger effort.

G: Why do you think this was true?

C: Well, that was his feeling. He certainly had no idea of a substitute government. He didn't have any views on that at all. And the civilian politicians essentially joined him rather than being a part of his plot. They assembled after the coup had started to try to give it some general direction and political direction. But by that time the President had reacted, had called upon the forces from outside the area, and particularly from the south and a

couple from the north. They moved in the next day and the coup was over without any fighting particularly, other than the little shooting at the first part of the coup.

G: Now, you said that your first indication of the coup, or at least you knew the coup was in progress because the troops went by your house. Did we have no warning, no advance notice of this?

C: I don't think any particular warning, no. I remember I went out to dinner the night before with the Ambassador and we certainly had no thoughts of that. We knew there was some dissatisfaction, but to isolate, to prognosticate a coup from some individual colonel is really quite an effort. After it happened, our people got on to it and gave very full and complete reporting. We had a network of voice radios around town that we used. We put people with the different elements of the coup, both with the government and with the coup leaders so that we had a very full reporting of everything that was happening after that happened.

G: So there was somebody from the CIA with the coup leaders when the confrontation was taking place at the palace?

C: There was a CIA officer with the civilians, who sat with them and reported to me what was happening by the phone, radio or whatever we had at the time. There was another officer who just walked in on the Colonel and sat with him pretty much. They did not appear when they were going to meet the government side, they weren't part of that, but in the councils they were there reporting on what was happening so we'd know about it.

G: Now, Tran Van Don says there was a CIA man with the coup leaders, and he even goes as far as to say his name was Miller. Does that ring any bells in your mind?

C: Well, I am probably under some constraints as to whether I can say the names. I do know the names of the two men that I mentioned and they are the main ones, as I recall, the one with the civilians and one with the others. There may have been some others, but I'd rather not give the names without knowing whether I'm authorized to or not.

G: That's understandable. I'm not trying to drag that sort of thing in.

C: No, it's fair enough. No problem.

G: I have heard stories that a CIA man--and I'm going to quote somebody--got caught on the wrong side of a coup about 1960 and they had to take him out, and I was wondering if that was this one?

C: Oh, yes. I've described that in the book a little bit, the subtle way in which [Ngo Dinh] Nhu arranged for him to be taken out.

G: They threatened him out?

C: Yes. It was kind of transparent in the way it was done, but it was very subtle, and I thought quite amusing.

G: Why was Nhu so upset if all that was going on was reporting?

C: Well, he, I think, had an idea that more was going on. After all, from his point of view, even the presence of an American in those councils would be a form of participation. I mean, I tried to draw the distinction between reporting and encouraging as two different things, but to the outsider sometimes the mere presence is an encouragement. So I appreciated Nhu's problem on it, that's why I wasn't morally indignant or anything about it. I knew exactly what his problem was, and that the problem we needed was some face-saving way of getting around the impasse, which I still think he provided.

G: Did this have a lingering effect in Nhu or Diem's mind, do you think, about what the CIA might or might not do in future coups?

C: Oh, I think both of them were aware that CIA had its independent links in various places and would try to get independent reporting. And, of course, in the summer of 1963 when our government and the Vietnamese came to issue, the mouthpiece there, the English language paper, ran a great story about how the CIA had tried to run a coup in 1963. Well, they're right, we did. It's not exactly news. But to find them turning on CIA at that point, at a point when CIA was probably one of their strongest advocates within the American government. . . . But they were using it because they were dealing with the American government, and if the American government had turned hostile to them, they had to assume that CIA would.

G: You're referring to John Richardson, now, I think.

C: Yes. Well, and I've forgotten--it was about August, as I

remember, of 1963 [that] the whole series of headlines [appeared] about the CIA coup uncovered and so forth. And it's true; we had to go on out to try to find one at that point under instructions and had not found it but certainly had looked hard.

G: Were the Diems floating this, or did they know something?

C: Oh, I suspect they knew about it. I suspect they ran into enough evidence of it. We had talked to a bunch of officers there and I think scared a number of them. I think some of them reinsured and told the government about the conversations. I don't have any doubt about that whatsoever.

G: So when the coup plotters finally did begin their plotting, this--

C: Well, you remember the end of that effort. The generals told us to go away, but if something happened they would be back. "Just rest quietly, this is not the time. If something happens, we'll be back." Sure enough, they called one of our officers in the afternoon they decided to move in November.

G: At least some people had sort of despaired that the generals were ever going to move, didn't they?

C: Well, that I couldn't say for sure. I was spending a good part of my time trying to argue against encouraging them. But always in a situation like that, yes, there were people who wanted it to happen. It wasn't happening for a month and a month and a month and they would probably get impatient.

G: Right. Right.

C: I don't recall any such conversation, although it may be in the records for all I know.

G: I'm intrigued by the use of CIA communications by people who don't normally use CIA communications. Was it not common but did it happen that foreign officials would use CIA communications in the belief that they were more secure, more direct or whatever?

C: Foreign officials?

G: Yes.

C: Yes, sometimes, in various parts of the world. In various places a foreign leader might think that he could be dealing with CIA and have kind of a direct shot into the policy levels in Washington rather than going into the kind of more bureaucratic concept of the Department of State and the Foreign Service and all that. And [they thought] they would receive more of an understanding transmission of their ideas than might occur through the diplomatic channel. Now this can become a problem. It can either become a problem or it can be very useful, depending upon the attitude of the ambassador and the local chief of station and the head of CIA and whoever's the secretary of state. Because in some situations, if those four people have enough confidence in each other that they're going to play the same game, then the foreigner can be given the impression that he's getting this direct shot so that he's going to be perhaps more revealing of his ideas. And nobody will be out of sympathy, because everybody will be consulted and there'll be no feeling that something's going on behind his back. On the other hand, if the ambassador gets persnickety about his privileges, or if the chief of station begins to think he's the ambassador, then you've got trouble and it doesn't work.

G: Does this happen?

C: It has happened in various places that the ambassador has been upset and said, "No, if the chief of government wants to deal with the Americans, he's got to deal with me."

G: Did this happen in Saigon?

C: Well, [Henry Cabot] Lodge of course cut off the Richardson contact in order to make the point that there wasn't an indirect way around him. When I went out there on a trip, he told me I couldn't go see the people in the palace, which I think was also making his point that they had to deal with him. Other than that, no. [Elbridge] Durbrow used the technique very well. We very easily keep each other totally informed. No question about who was the ambassador and it worked very well. With [Frederick] Nolting the same, no problems whatsoever. Total confidence. With [Maxwell] Taylor, I would have had a hard time. That was such a confused period after the overthrow.

G: Now you said that Lodge broke that contact primarily as a signal to Diem?

C: Yes.

G: He was not upset or had the feeling that anybody was [undermining him]?

C: I don't think so, no. I think he was giving it as a signal to the regime. I don't believe, he never gave any indication, that he thought the CIA was cheating on him and running a separate policy. Even though we'd disagree from time to time, there'd be no question of CIA people there, under my instructions, that they would respond to the Ambassador, and he was the boss there. And I don't recall any problem about that. The move of Richardson was a policy decision just to indicate the end of a close relationship with Nhu.

G: Now, this is a subject that's been hashed over endlessly and has raised an awful lot of smoke and that concerns the effectiveness of a number of methods used in pacification. There were Provincial Reconnaissance Units--or PRUs--People's Action Teams. The Marine Corps had its own concept, Combined Action Program, County Fairs, and of course the Phoenix program, which you supervised. Is there any easy comparison to make between all of these things, their effectiveness and so on?

C: Well, the easiest comparison is that strategic hamlets started in 1961, early 1961. Wilfred Burchett says that they had become so effective that in 1962 the year belonged to the government, and that was a communist appraisal of the fact. There was still a lot of criticism about how good they are. That's what gets confusing. When you look at a program, you can see all the faults and you complain about them, but if you're on the enemy's side, it may be having quite an effect despite its faults. Of course, strategic hamlets stopped with the overthrow of Diem. They stopped before, when the attention of the palace drifted off after May of 1960 to the problems with the Buddhists and with the Americans. The strategic hamlets essentially stopped. After the overthrow, the communists mounted an attack on them, because they thought they would--well, they began substantially to attack them in about July, and were beginning to have an effect because of the lack of priority and the preoccupation of the government with other things. Then with the overthrow, they mounted a final one that pretty well destroyed it. I mean, there just wasn't any program after November. So you're starting at ground zero at that point.

In 1964 and 1965 we looked around for some vestiges of some of the programs that had existed in earlier times, and

we found up in central Vietnam a vestige of a program that we had supported of Popular Youth--or Popular Force, whatever it was called--which was teams going into villages.

G: Is this [Nguyen] Khanh's old program?

C: Yes. We set up a new program starting up there with Colonel [Nguyen] Be, who was the deputy province chief of Binh Dinh. He set up a small effort of developing these teams of simple people--not intellectuals, but simply people--to go into a village and do the political job of helping the villagers organize the village and get it going again. This seemed to be making some sense, so we spread it down into the rest of Vietnam in 1965 and 1966 and then set up a national school at Vung Tau at about 1966 or 1967--I've forgotten where--something like that.

G: Is this when Major Sauvageot comes in? Do you remember him?

C: Yes. Yes. Major Sauvageot was there, Jean Sauvageot.

G: Where is he now?

C: Out here in Virginia in the neighborhood.

G: Is he?

C: If you haven't talked to him, you ought to.

G: Well, I would like to very much.

C: The program was, I think, marginally effective. I wouldn't say much more than that, mainly because the enemy was fairly strong and because there wasn't much other than that program. So they'd go into a village and develop it, but then when the time came to leave, they'd say "We can't leave," or if they did leave it would regress because it wasn't patched into a broader program. The PRU was a fifty or hundred-man force in each province which was just to give the province chief a team that he could use for the kind of offensive actions that were going on in the 1966-67-68 period when, literally, the enemy was at the gate. These people, the province chiefs, did not have authority over the military forces in the neighborhood and they wanted some force that they could use for a local purpose and so we supported that. They were very effective forces, but again, they weren't integrated into any kind of an overall structure very well. And there were some abuses by those teams.

G: Wasn't there a lot of talk about their being a bunch of thugs and practicing indiscriminate assassination?

C: Well, there was a lot of talk about it, there wasn't much evidence of it. But they were tough nuts, there's no question about it, and that was a tough period. The key was that that was a period in which there was an enormous amount of anarchy and confusion and chaos, and a lot of bad things went on on both sides, no question about it. I mean, that was a very brutal, bitter period of the fight, when we were pouring the troops in.

Then the thing began to get organized when [Robert] Komer organized the CORDS [Civil Operations and Rural Development Staff] to try to put our programs together and we, using our influence with the Vietnamese, tried to put together a program that would be an integration. After the Tet attack, this became the government's primary program, the priority program. It was an integrated program of political, economic and security elements. The political element was the revival of village government, and a variety of other things: a little propaganda activity, the receipt of the defectors from the other side, the amnesty program for them and various things like that. But the politics of it was to try to get the village to assume its own responsibilities for its own destiny and for decision-making on the civilian side, you might call it. Even though there were a few soldiers in the line, it was essentially the civilian government attempting to get the participation of the people at the village level.

At the economic level, again, [it was designed] to try to get activity at the village level. Not great national plans for a school in every hamlet, but what does this hamlet need? What kind of activity does it need, a ditch, a wall or a road or a bridge or whatever. And [there was] self-help and some contribution by the government to the program to, again, [encourage] this sense of participation.

Then on the security side, [there was] a very substantial increase in the strength and the effectiveness of the weaponry of the popular forces and the regional forces, the territorials, in other words, as distinct from the main army. [We were] supplementing them by the self-defense force, which were unpaid people just doing a night or two guard a week but giving them arms. We gave five hundred thousand weapons to the villagers for use in that kind of a program, not to the police or the military but to those villagers, again, [so] that they would be able

to participate. The key thinking being that if you have a village of three hundred people and five men walk in with pistols, they dominate it. But if you've got ten people on guard, and they're kind of scared and they may shoot once and run away, but the five men don't dominate it. They can't come in and totally dominate it and run it anymore. So in that sense, the motive again was political.

Now, Phoenix was an element of that security side, which is to try to identify the political order of battle of the enemy. We had lots of order of battle about the regular forces and the local forces and all that sort of thing and battalions and all the rest of it. But the question was, who are the internal, subversive, secret apparatus in the country? Who are they? What are they doing? Until you know about them, you can't do anything much about them. So this was an attempt to regularize the intelligence coverage: decent interrogations, decent record-keeping, evidence, all that sort of thing, the whole structure of the struggle against the secret apparatus. That was Phoenix.

Well, I'm fairly simple about this, because I say that the combination of the three, and the number-one priority that President [Nguyen Van] Thieu and Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker and General [Creighton] Abrams gave to this triple approach--and it was the principal government program after 1968, there's no question about it--in my opinion won the guerrilla part of the war. And it's very easy to show it. I won't give you any numbers or percentages or any of that jazz, but the fact was that in 1968, the Tet attack was a massive, countrywide guerrilla attack supported by some military forces. It happened to have failed in its objectives, but it certainly had an enormous psychological victory. Nonetheless, it showed that the enemy had a countrywide guerrilla apparatus.

The pacification program was then started. Four years later, in the spring of 1972, there was another major attack which took place at three points on the border of South Vietnam, Quang Tri and Kontum and An Loc. It consisted of purely military actions with artillery, tanks, all the rest of it, bombing, all the rest. The South Vietnamese were totally unbothered in all the rest of South Vietnam, to the extent that they took the 21st Division out of the Delta and put it up in An Loc to fend off that attack. In other words, the guerrillas weren't there, and in the final attack of 1975, the North Vietnamese commander in his report clearly says that he was just dealing with military movements and had no role for the guerrillas at all.

Fascinating.

So the answer is, that's a pretty objective test. You have a countrywide guerrilla attack, and four years later they have to attack you from the outside by regular forces. It means they've lost anything inside. Now, there's all sorts of allegations about how they overexposed themselves at Tet and then shot their wad and all the rest of it. I'm sure there's some truth to that, but the conscious nature of the program to develop the degree of cohesion in the countryside, the participation, I think really did it. As you know, I did a lot of travel there, and by 1971 when I left I could go to places that I'd have had my head shot off three years before, no question about that. I rode through the countryside in the night and rode up the canals in the Delta, all sorts of places that I never could have gone a very few years before. And it wasn't because we had forces with us, because you'd see a nondescript looking bunch of fellows up the canal and they'd wave to you with their guns. They were a local self-defense group.

G: Have you ever heard the story that Barry Zorthian had a plan to drive from Ca Mau to Quang Tri by himself in a jeep just to prove to people how much better it was?

C: Yes. Well, John Vann and I drove across the Delta from Can Tho to Chau Doc on Tet, 1971, and we had nobody with us, just the two of us on a couple of motorcycles.

G: How was Vann feeling about things by that time?

C: Oh, he felt that it was doing well and he, of course, was so satisfied with what had happened in the Delta, because it had been totally cleaned out of any enemy problems--except for minor little things--that he was interested in moving up to II Corps to take over the effort there. That's where he was killed in the 1972 attack. But I think he felt very satisfied about it, even to the extent of keeping his mouth shut once in a while which was an extreme sacrifice for John. He told me that one time, he said, "You know, I feel so strongly about the way this thing is working and the way we're running it that I'm even not going to criticize."

G: I'm sure you've heard the famous story of his confrontation with Walt Rostow, right at Tet, in fact. He came in and Rostow said, "Now, before you start, Vann, I know where you're coming from, but don't you think the war is going to be over by July?" And Vann said, "Oh, hell, no, I think we can hold out longer than that."

C: Yes, I do remember that. (Laughter)

G: I've become a little interested in some of the developments within the CIA itself by way of my Vietnam adventures. Can you give me any commentary on the effect on the agency of the changes of leadership which took place in the decade of the sixties?

C: Do you mean [John] McCone to [William] Raborn to [Richard] Helms?

G: Yes.

C: Well, McCone came in, of course, following Allen Dulles. McCone was, I thought, a splendid director. He used the agency for what it could do very effectively. I think he rebuilt a great deal of the morale following the Bay of Pigs which people felt was a disaster, which it was. He changed a few people, but generally he really put it back to work. He used particularly the analytical side of it very effectively and brought them into advising on decision-making and that sort of thing.

G: Can I interrupt you there? I know that McCone felt in early 1965 that a gradual escalation of bombing was not going to work. I've seen memos in which he said either you've got to hurt them badly or not venture this at all. Was this a reflection of the analyst's view?

C: No, I don't think it was the analyst; it was John McCone largely. I mean, McCone had the courage of his convictions. He'd say things that were pretty far out, but he would say them as recommendations. His estimates would be well-founded. He would use the analysts very well for their estimates, but he'd make his judgments about what we ought to do. That was his business, not theirs.

G: A related criticism is a criticism which has been made that the agency, in some rather important cases, has a tendency to make very good analyses and then not do what the analysts said would work.

C: Well, what I think you can find, and replete through the Pentagon Papers, are a series of estimates that, you know, bombing won't get the North Vietnamese to change their minds. [There were] the estimates that the various kinds of military actions were not going to solve the problem of the infrastructure and the guerrilla force problem in South Vietnam, that the military approach wasn't the answer, that

more military would not solve the problem, such as cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Sometimes they were wrong. They were spectacularly wrong on Cambodia, because the analysts said that the supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail were enough to satisfy the needs of the communists, and there was no evidence that they were coming through Cambodia. Of course, after the overthrow of [Norodom] Sihanouk in 1970, we found the bills of lading in Cambodia where they'd been shipping it through by the bushel. The military had always thought that it was there, but it was so obvious. It was easy and not very hard but we had never gotten good evidence of it, and the analysts, in the absence of good evidence, had said it can't be happening. I disagreed with that at the time. I wasn't working for CIA at that point but that sounded pretty silly to me. But they had a big fight about it.

But the answer was that the analysts, I think particularly in the sort of mid-sixties, did a very good job of trying to say this is a much more complicated fight than you're thinking it is. It's not a military fight, it's much more of a political fight, and your military actions are not going to solve it. The enemy is very hard-headed; they're very tough and they're very effective in running their operations. On the government side, God knows the governments were weak, but unless something is developed here, that you're not going to get anywhere. Now, that was their approach, and they were basically right. I sympathized with them.

Where I think they began to go wrong--the analysts--is after 1968 when I think they were somewhat infected with the general academic view of Vietnam as a lost cause. I don't think they paid enough direct attention to what was actually happening but instead were hung on their earlier projections. Because what was actually happening was, I think, that change in the country atmosphere that I was demonstrating. That doesn't mean that the North Vietnamese were going to quit; the question was whether the North Vietnamese could be pushed back to the borders and then held there. And if they came across again, bop them on the head. [There would be] what I used to call the residual level of violence you were going to have there all along, because the North Vietnamese were not going to quit, and the peace treaty in 1973 was just a pause as far as they were concerned. It was pretty obvious. We signed the peace treaty in order to get our P.O.W.s out more than anything. We already had most of our forces out. We yielded on a couple of the key things which is whether the North

Vietnamese would be allowed to be in Cambodia and the areas which they then proceeded to build up with a great logistics accomplishment on the borders there, and then launched their attack in 1975 and it won.

But I think the contrast is between 1972 and 1975. In 1972, with large-scale logistic support, with a minute number of Americans--I don't think there were any combat forces to speak of there--and some B-52 bombing, they stopped the North Vietnamese, and it was South Vietnamese forces that stood up and did it. In 1975, when their munitions had been cut back very substantially by the Congress, when Congress said no, it wasn't going to get them another appropriation for even the weapons of war, and there's certainly no possibility of B-52 help, they failed.

G: Now, one allegation in that respect has been that there were, in fact, enough munitions in the country at current rates of expenditure to have held out until August. That the big blow of the congressional move was a blow against morale more than material.

C: Both. Both. The fact was that the estimate as to what the enemy was going to do, which turns out to be exactly what the report by the North Vietnamese said was their intention--it's fascinating, the coincidence--was that they were going to launch an attack in early 1975. But it was going to be the beginning of a long series, and they hoped to bring it to culmination in 1976, which was our election year. Of course, if they got a target of opportunity, they were going to go ahead and exploit it, which is exactly what they did.

Now, that was our estimate, and it was the South Vietnamese government's estimate. The government looked at the American attitude toward additional logistical aid [?], thinking ahead to that 1976 major attack, and realized the stocks were going to have to be stretched if they were going to have anything at all. This brought about a totally different tactical [approach] toward the problem by the Thieu government. For instance, when there was a move into--what the hell's the name of the province just up north of Saigon? [Phuoc Long] Never mind. Anyway, in the previous times, a move like that would have resulted in a very extensive South Vietnamese air mobile operation up to drive them out. They took the province capital. The province capital's about fifty or a hundred houses, so it's not all that important, quite frankly. But they did not move, because they wanted to conserve their fuel, their

weaponry, their helicopters, the wear and tear and all the rest of it, because there weren't any more. So instead of the forward defense that they had been fighting with their military, they were not fighting a forward defense. They were fighting a conservative defensive approach, and that began in the fall of 1974 that they began to do that. You had guns that were held to one round a day, two rounds a day. I mean, that was their allocation and that's all there were, that's all they were allowed to supply. Sure, back in the depot there was probably more, but if they shot them up then, they wouldn't have them in 1976 and that's what happened to Vietnam, in my mind.

G: Do you think that the move out of the highlands was a great mistake?

C: Oh, it was a disaster. Yes. Well, it was a disaster the way it was done. The general who went up there gave the orders and then walked away and it was really astonishing. But you had similar failings in 1972, you remember. There was a division that broke and ran up at Quang Tri in 1972. But they picked up and patched it together and held before they got to Hue. I remember my estimate in 1972 was that they might lose Hue, but they would be held before they got to Da Nang. Well, they didn't even lose Hue that time. They did lose Quang Tri but then they drove them back out. So you had those tactical errors in both 1972 and 1975, but in 1972 they were then picked up, compensated for; in 1975 it just began the whole process of unraveling.

G: Do you think it would have been a viable policy to try to hold the Delta, you know, a defense line north of Saigon?

C: No, not that. No, by that time the rout phenomena had gone too far, and the enemy had too many forces. They had about, what, twelve or fourteen divisions or something, I've forgotten. Something like that.

G: Something on that order, yes.

C: They had more forces than could be met on that basis. Now, the place to have held them was right at the three places where they came over the frontier and they didn't have the forces to do it with and the logistics.

G: To return to the original question about the CIA, we got--

C: Let me say another. . . . McCone left after President Johnson took over. McCone was so oriented towards serving

President Kennedy that I think President Johnson had a few doubts about him and vice versa. There just wasn't that much warmth between the two, as I remember. Then of course when he left, they put in Admiral--

G: Admiral Raborn?

C: Admiral Raborn. But he only lasted for about a year. He had been sent in because he'd done such a good job with the Polaris. He was not a subtle fellow in terms of political estimates and so forth, and there was, I think, kind of a hatchet job done on him, too, by some of the more intellectual types around town.

G: Well, I'd heard that the word around the Georgetown cocktail circuit--whatever that is--was that Raborn was committing faux pas after faux pas.

C: Well, he might have had a little trouble. You know, he's a smart enough guy in his field, but he just wasn't in the right field when he was getting into the subtleties of the Dominican Republic or something. So anyway, he left, and then Helms became head. You ask did that have an impact, it did in a way, because Helms came up through the intelligence professional channel, and a general feeling in the intelligence professional channel is that the more vigorous political operations and paramilitary operations usually backfire because they become known and they become criticized. The agency really ought to focus on the really hard intelligence targets and get out of these forward position activities and programs. That was not a new thought, I mean, the process had begun in the early sixties really. The fifties were a time when the agency was doing everything, and then the Bay of Pigs made that somewhat dubious, and then it was costing more money and the money crunch was on a little bit.

So over the sixties, from about 1962 or so to about 1970, the agency was very substantially reducing its role in various parts of the world. Now, they did a few things--the Chile thing and some others--but very minor compared to what they were doing in the fifties.

G: I was going to say, is it too much to say that this was an anti-covert action feeling in general?

C: It wasn't an anti, it was just a feeling, well, that they were of somewhat dubious value, some of these things. And they certainly exposed the agency. And the Ramparts thing

in 1967 was another example of getting an awful lot of heat for what didn't seem to be that important. I think it was very important in the fifties; it probably kept on going too long, that particular program. You know, it's hard to close a program once you get it going.

G: Covert action was your specialty, wasn't it?

C: Yes. Oh, yes.

G: Well, how did you feel?

C: Oh, I felt there was still something to do. I was all for doing things. But by then I was out at Vietnam at that other job doing what I would have done in the agency but in an open area, which I must say is a better way to do it if you can do it.

G: Well, some people would say that that was the CIA.

C: Well, it wasn't. But the fact is that you were able to work informally because of the wartime funding problems or techniques. That you didn't have to, you know, have every little jot and tittle approved by Washington and a different agency in Washington. I got money from AID, from USIA, from the military, got people from there and CIA and every place, State Department people--everything--and just put them into one team. The GAO came over to investigate how much money we were spending at one time and I, quite frankly, in some cases had to tell them that I didn't know. Because the material was passed into the stream back in Washington, and I didn't know how much money was involved. I had nothing to do with the money; I wasn't handling the money. I was just handling the strategy and insuring that the weapons went to the right places and things like that.

G: From what I know of GAO, that must have shocked them right out of their shoes.

C: It really did shock them, but they did understand it. They wrote a very good report. They said, "Well, there ought to be some better controls on this, but we understand the point." I said, you know, you can't have guys out there with a machine gun counting the damn bullets. They were pretty good about it, but it was initially quite a shock to them.

But that function, then, you see, was what had previously been a CIA function, the various teams and some

of the local security stuff.

G: Well, a lot of CIA personnel were used, were they not?

C: Not very many. A few, yes, but surprisingly few.I'd say ten, twenty, something like that.

G: Is that all?

C: Not many more than that in the CORDS programThe CIA had their own station. They had some of the people in the countryside, and I worked out a coordination so that we didn't trip on each other's feet.But they pretty much stayed to themselves. And we borrowed a few CIA people to use them in the CORDS program, like myself.

G: That's an interesting story about how you were sort of picked off the tree here in Washington.

C: Yes. Well, it made sense. If I'd spent so much time on Vietnam I really should go out and contribute what I could.

But let me just give you one more figureI looked up in the figures one time. In the mid to late-fifties, I think that about half of CIA's budget went into covert action, paramilitary and political and things like the Bay of Pigs and some other things.By the early seventies--and this was before the investigations--that figure had sunk to something like four or five per cent.

G: That's astonishing.

C: And that was a real comparison.I mean, the total was different but it was a real diminution of the amount of effort being put on there.Well, we had turned over to Defense Department funding the Laos operation, Vietnamese operations, turned that all over, all the RDF teams, the rural development teams and all the rest of it that we had started, The Vung Tau Training Center which CIA had started, the old Phoenix program became funded and became a CORDS program. So all of that stuff dropped out of the CIA budget, and the war in Laos dropped out of it, so you really had very little left. I think it went down too far, and then you had the investigations and the uproarI suspect it's a little bit on its way up.I don't think it'll get back to 1950, but I hope it gets up a ways, because I think there are things you can do subtly with CIA covert action.

G: I don't mean to seem to keep getting you to answer critics,

but that's the way issues seem to come up all the time.

C: No, that's all right. No, it's easy. No problem.

G: One of your colleagues has said that he takes exactly the opposite view of what happened to the provincial action team program. I believe he says that it had been a very good program but got enormously diluted later because someone said this is a good idea, let's do it every place, and you couldn't keep the quality.

C: Yes, you never can in a war, let's face it. I mean, you don't fight wars with elite troops. But you have to use it on a large scale in order to have effect. The People's Action Teams, which became the RD [Revolutionary Development] Cadre, I think that if you were going to have an effect upon the war in general, you were going to have to expand it to a rather broader thing. What really happened to them was that as we got the thing under some control in this integrated approach, with the political and the economic and the security, then the RD teams began to run out of a job, because instead of their going in and putting together a village community and government, we were using the local indigenous villagers to produce their own government. So the first step we made was, for instance, to cut the size of the team in half, as I remember, and turn them into much more just plain political actioners and not having a security job and all that sort of thing. We were bringing village chiefs and hamlet chiefs down to Vung Tau for the training instead of transmitting it through these teams, and gradually the teams began to run out of a job.

I don't think making it countrywide--I'm sure that reduced the quality level, but you can have the best quality thing but if it doesn't have a strategic effect it's of no help. And what we were trying to do was to have a strategic effect countrywide. The best testimony I think to the effectiveness of one element of the program, the Phoenix program--and believe me, if you read the documents, the monthly reports from our people about Phoenix, they're a continual stream of criticism about "this program isn't doing what it should be," and "damn it, it isn't working right," and all the rest of it. "The Vietnamese don't seem to be able to get the idea of how to do this," and "oh, records are just awful," you know.

G: That's pretty discouraging.

C: Yes, I knew it was going on, but I still said, "Just keep at

it. Let it grow, let them improve. Just like the strategic hamlets in 1960 and 1961, let them improve. It'll take time. It'll get going." But there were still [comments], "Oh, gee, it's not working right." Well, by 1971, the effect not just of Phoenix, but of the whole effort came to a situation where the communists were losing contact with the people. The provincial committee of Long An province, for instance, would be over in the Parrot's Beak in Cambodia.

G: That was a very tough province in the sixties.

C: Yes, because it couldn't stay in Long An. They had lost contact, and they weren't able to maintain their links there, and a variety of others [were] similarly going pretty well. The biggest testimony, of course, has happened since the war when several people, including Stan Karnow, were out there a few months ago and the communists that he talked to said that the period of the Phoenix was the worst time they ever had during the war, the worst time, it had almost put them down. Now, I'm not sure that they just mean Phoenix, and I asked Stan whether that's really what they meant or whether they didn't mean the overall pacification program, the whole integrated effort, which is what I think put them down rather than just the targeting of who these fellows were. He said, no, they said Phoenix, but I don't know whether they really know what they mean or not.

G: I asked you once about something Karnow said in a little blurb in the Encounter magazine about his having discovered that the Vietnamese who'd been in charge of the strategic hamlets turns out to be a double, and that they've interred his remains with great honor and so on and so on. What's your reaction to that?

C: I'm trying to figure out who it would be.

G: Pham Ngoc Thau, is that right?

C: Oh, that story. Oh, I don't think that's true, frankly. Pham Ngoc Thau--I knew Pham Ngoc Thau, he was one of the fellows interested in the strategic hamlets and that sort of approach early on. He got all cranked up and made an abortive bid for power at one point in one of the confused periods, but I don't think he was any major figure on the other side. Who was the other fellow whose brother was an agent that John Vann tried to get out of jail so much?

G: That's a story I don't know.

C: There was an officer whose brother had made contact with him, and he had not reported it as he should have. The Thieu government took a dim view of it and put him in jail for not doing so.

G: His brother was in the North or VC?

C: Tran--Tran something Chau [?]. He was an officer, and he was a province chief and a good one, but he had been contacted by his brother who was a North Vietnamese officer. He had not reported it and in time of war I really can't get very much cranked up about punishing somebody who plays that game.

There were a few agents, but the interesting thing is how few agents surfaced after the war. I mean, if it was a great penetrated place, you would have had an awful lot more, and it didn't.

G: I'm not sure I asked you about this last time--if I did, forgive me--who is running South Vietnam today?

C: The North Vietnamese.

G: Are they carpetbagging?

C: Yes, they have some people there that are cadres and so forth. They still keep a substantial number of forces, troops down there. And the PRG that was supposed to be the great southern liberation force has almost disappeared. The only one with any kind of job is Madame Binh [?], who is minister of education or something up in the North, but the rest of them are nothing. They've just been dropped away.

G: The leadership of the NLF.

C: It's an occupation like the occupation of the Confederacy, I guess, in a way. And they don't appear to have built up anything to replace the old government.

G: I wonder how much trouble they're having in the countryside?

C: A little, not very much, and it's pretty hopeless. But they do have some troubles up in the tribal areas, as I understand it, and they have some troubles in some other areas, but they're pretty ruthless about putting down things. They're not subtle.

G: Pretty effective?

C: I don't think there's much hope. In other words, with half a million people having left, run away--and those probably the better ones--suppose you go out and have a little ambush on the road. What good is it really going to do unless you get some indication of some support from somewhere?

G: That's a sort of a mirror image of what I take it to be your view of the role of the North in the southern insurgency, is that there is no leadership, no base for expertise, no ideological thrust.

C: They didn't seem to; they had one, I think. They had a limited degree and they had some good people, let's face it. Very dedicated people. Read those diaries and they're very, very compelling. But they had a very hard time relating to the southerners, and there wasn't much love lost between them, and the southerner just didn't want to be bossed. Then when the southerner's life was improving so remarkably under the government in terms of security and in terms of his economic status and all the rest of it, then he just wasn't interested.

G: When would you date that from, about?

C: About 1969. Really began having an impact.

G: Didn't the southerners and the northerners have nicknames for each other? I know that the southerners called the northerners "spinach," and I can't remember what the northerners called the southerners.

C: That I don't know. I don't know. Well, they thought they were pretty fat and lazy.

G: Well, the nickname reflected that.

C: Yes. But you see the theory that this was some great southern rebellion then is just absolute nonsense. The southerners for a while were subject to fear and some lingering degree of nationalist feeling about the flawed credentials of the government as a nationalist government. That certainly existed for a while. I think it was pretty well overcome in the late fifties by Diem's vigorous social and economic programs. It was revived in the early sixties with the rather intense subversive program that the communists launched in 1960, stressing the American Diemists as the continuing puppet colonialist masters. And they did some recruiting then, and I think the strategic hamlets threw that back.

Then of course the government collapsed and everything was a mess, and then they were just holding on. In that time, I think the communists did some real recruiting, you know, had a very substantial number of recruits, some ideologically, some out of fear, fear that they had to go along. As I say, those five men with the pistols, they dominate the village when they're there, so you go along with them. Then after the Tet attack and it began to look as though the government was going to survive--and actually even earlier, which is the whole light at the end of the tunnel controversy. You had a constitution, you had a government, you're beginning to put the order together, the Tet attack was thrown back and then the pacification program went into high gear. The Americans began to leave, and the combination of all of that I think then brought the southern people to a feeling that they were on to a pretty good thing, the land reform, the various other programs. Then, of course, we got sick and tired of it, and when they did throw off the 1972 attack, that was a great success. When Thieu made the treaty, I think he had his reservations and his fears about it, but he really didn't have much choice because we put such pressure on him to make it. He thought if he could just keep the arms coming and the airplanes, he'd be able to hold the next attack off, if necessary. He didn't because the weapons weren't there, and by that time we'd thrown our President Nixon out and there wasn't any chance of using the air force in support of him.

G: Let me broach a subject which has gained a lot of currency recently, and this is this order of battle controversy. I don't know if you saw the Mike Wallace show--

C: I saw about two-thirds of it, I guess.

G: Okay. In light of this, would you comment on that controversy as you saw it from your point of view?

C: I wasn't really very much involved in it. I was head of the Far East division at that time, but this was an analyst problem, and so it wasn't the operations side of the agency that was involved in it. It was really the analytical side that was debating this. I knew generally what was going on. As I understand the argument, there were two arguments, and they got confused. The one argument is whether there was or was not a surge in infiltration in late 1967. I frankly don't know the answer to that question. I mean, I'm sure the records are full of it and that'll get itself solved one way or the other. I think there is a technical explanation for some differences in numbers in that we had certain

information which was delayed in getting to us at one point and then we broke through and had it on a contemporary basis rather than three or four months later.

G: Was three or four months a common lag?

C: It was in infiltration figures for that period because we were getting this at a certain point and it would take them three or four months to get down to where they'd be near us. But I don't know; I'm not sure on that. I didn't really have anything to do with those figures.

The other point was an argument about what the strength of the enemy was, and I testified on this a couple of years ago, or five years ago, whenever it was, in some detail. Sam Adams was making his charges and I answered them with what I thought was the story. The Sam Adams argument is that the military were just counting soldiers--even irregulars, but soldiers--and that there were a lot of other people that ought to be counted if you were going to get a comprehensive look at the kind of war you were facing. The agency agreed with that. Adams then took a couple of villages, as I understand, as samples and then projected a nationwide force out of those samples. The agency at that point said, "Oops, no, you can't do that. Your evidence is not good enough to make that kind of hard projection into absolute figures at that stage, although you're right that there is something other than the pure military forces." I don't recall that there was much argument about whether there was that many--three hundred thousand--military. I think that was understood and accepted. The argument was about whether you could quantify the other group. And we finally stuck and the estimate that went to the President says there are about three hundred thousand military forces of various kinds, and then there was a note that said there's an unquantifiable additional element to the war in terms of the people who have just casual connections with it that must be considered when you're thinking of the total force you're facing, but no numbers. Now, Adams was upset that his number wasn't used. He got mad and resigned and all the rest of it, and he's been carrying on this campaign ever since. Then I guess Westy [William Westmoreland] quite obviously got a little confused about the details of some of the questions which were handled way down below him. You ask me how many VC there were in Quang Tin province in 1971 and I tell you I don't know. You know, I'd have to go look at the records for that.

G: Now, Wallace seems to have been particularly upset with the

possibility that there was within the military intelligence order of battle people, their own debate and he makes it appear at least that Westmoreland simply said, "Well, we're going to put a lid on this, and this is what the number's going to be."

C: I know that allegation, but I don't--I think it relates to this, not whether the three hundred is three hundred. It's my understanding that that was pretty well accepted. The only question is this additional category as to whether you should give numbers to them, and I know the agency said, no, you couldn't. I don't think the military thought you could either. But Adams did, and that's where it comes from. But that's separate from the infiltration argument. I don't know how they all patch together.

G: Of course, the main conclusion that Wallace seems to draw is that we had fundamentally miscalculated the whole thing.

C: And that's nonsense. The fact is that Fred Weyand moved a division down near Saigon just before Tet, because he knew something was happening in that area that was very important in the battle, Rostow's own remarks about the various indicators of troubles, and of course the basic fact that the attacks failed. I mean, let's go back to that. That's fairly important.

G: No, this is not in the area of expertise of CIA, but I think you probably have an opinion on it. It's been said that one of the reasons for the great psychological impact of Tet was the recent progress that had been emphasized so heavily and if we knew that there was something coming, why, for God's sake, didn't we prepare the public a little better for it?

C: I don't know. I think that the people were fairly content that 1967 had been a positive year in terms of what had been developed--mainly in structure--which gave a basis for now going out into the country and beginning to really do something well. The light at the end of the tunnel wasn't actually a bad phrase, when you think about what developed. But the short attention span of the American people had begun to be effective. The casualty rates were up and bothering, and the opposition in the schools and in the various intellectual communities to the war in Vietnam, which now was touching ten years--or eight, anyway--began to have its effect. At that point, you know there were enough mistakes that had been made: the Diem thing, the huge commitment of forces into a non-military kind of a problem, the frustration of our forces as they're looking around for

the war to fight and couldn't even find the enemy. It looked like things weren't really that well off and then suddenly they get the TV screens all full of fellows in the embassy and people kind of panicked. That's what happened, they panicked.

G: Did the media panic?

C: Oh, clearly. You've seen this Peter Braestrup [Big Story] piece. Clearly the media panicked.

G: There's a current fashion among some journalists and ex-journalists who, I hesitate to say beat their breasts, but it's hard to call it anything else. "Mea culpa, mea culpa, we blew it." How do you feel about that?

C: Well, I think they have a responsibility to call things right. The problem with the competitive nature of the American media is that there's a high premium on the dramatic event and the perspective is very difficult to present. I remember taking a journalist out on one of my twice-a-week ventures to spend the night in the countryside. We went out and we talked to the various people and had a briefing about what the situation was there and all the rest of it, and on the way back I said, "What do you think?" And he said, "Well, nothing very dramatic." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "No action, nothing very special." I said, "For lord's sake, go over there and ask that lady over there where she was a year ago. I'll bet that she will tell you that she was in a refugee camp about thirty miles away here which the communists rocketed or mortared, that her three sons were missing, she didn't know where they were, and she just didn't know anything about it. Here she is back in her hometown, two of the sons are back--one's still missing--they're standing guard, they're back at their own farm, they've gotten some help to get the thing going again, the town's getting started again. This area that used to be a battlefield is now starting to come back into a village. You ask her if she doesn't think her life's dramatically different from what it was a year ago." "Yes, I suppose so but--"

G: But not news.

C: But no news. Yes. It's the biggest news of all. The most important news, and yet nothing. I mean, that's the dangerous part of it. And I know some of the more serious media are concerned about this problem. Well, that bonze burning, I think, made it absolutely impossible for

President Kennedy to do anything but move more or less the way he did. The thing was almost over when that happened. And it had nothing to do with reality, but it was just so strong a picture. You know, there are a whole bunch of other pictures like that--

G: And Madame Nhu didn't help that situation.

C: No, she didn't help it at all, although in a funny way she was an interesting character. She had a lot of positives in her, but they couldn't come out--she did not speak English well enough. She insisted on speaking it, and I don't think she understood it well enough, and I think that's where she made some of her more outrageous statements. She would make statements and I don't think be fully aware of the significance of the words she was using on some occasions.

G: What's a good book on the CIA? Are there any?

C: Well, let's see. Actually, the [Victor] Marchetti book [The CIA and The Cult of Intelligence] isn't bad. The Helms book, the [Thomas] Powers book on Helms--

G: The Man Who Kept the Secrets?

C: Yes, it's a little overly strong on the bureaucratic aspects, which I don't think are all that important. Of course, my own book is naturally one of the better ones, but-- (Laughter)

G: Of course.

C: Ray Cline has written a couple which are fair but are inclined to be heavily historical. [Lyman] Kirkpatrick's are clear, simple, organizational kind of things. David Martin did an interesting one on the counter intelligence problem, Wilderness of Mirrors.

G: I haven't read that one.

C: That's about the [James] Angleton problem, me and Angleton.

G: I meant to ask you about him.

C: An interesting guy.

G: Is he still around?

C: Yes. Yes, he's around.

G: I was fascinated to find he was a lapidary and a jewelry maker, because that's my hobby.

C: Oh, really? He's a very, very good guy. We obviously had a difference of opinion, but it was a professional one. It doesn't bother me.

G: Who was it that said counter intelligence is paranoia with a card file?

C: I haven't heard that. That's pretty good.

G: I think that's in the Powers book; I'm not sure.

C: It may be. But those are the main ones, I guess.

G: Just to finish off this order of battle thing so that there aren't any loose ends as far as this is concerned, it's also alleged that the White House was ignorant that there was a debate on this question.

C: I really don't know. It wouldn't necessarily be informed. I mean, you have arguments all over the bottom ends of the intelligence community every day that you don't tell the White House every detail of.

G: Well, some people say that Rostow, for instance, was passing not only summaries but raw intelligence to Johnson in late September.

C: I'm sure he was. I'm sure he was.

G: Wouldn't that have made it a little difficult for Johnson to have been in the dark?

C: No. The problem is, you see, the way intelligence works--the theory of it is that all the raw stuff goes to the center and then the analysts put it into final form for their great president. Well, that was fine until electric transmission came to work, and then it became absolutely essential that the White House be in on the original transmission of the electrical message. So the White House gets all the raw stuff by wire, then it gets the summary. Now, depending on the predilection of the individual president, the national security assistant, whoever, he'll pull raw things out. I've seen President Kennedy read it right off the teletape machine. Well, you say that's a violation of the way it ought to work, that's right, but he's not going to wait that extra two hours for that thing

to get to him. If he thinks it's important, he's going to read it right there.

G: Who is Colonel William Corson?

C: Bill Corson was a member of the Marines' Combined Action team. He got very upset because he said that we were using the wrong strategy, that we should have used his program, the Combined Action Platoons, and wrote a book which was kind of a denunciation of the strategy out there which was a little overdrawn, but had some good points in it, frankly. Then he went on and got a job with somebody--I don't know--and has written another book called The Armies of Ignorance with a lot of history stuff.I don't know how good it is.

G: The earlier book, I think, was called The Betrayal.

C: That's right, yes.

G: And I understand that Robert Komer was incensed at some of the things that the Colonel said in that.

C: Well, I'm sure. Of course, I've talked to Corson a few times. He's one of these guys that [thinks that] his solution is the only solution and the whole world is either venal or stupid if it doesn't apply to them.There are a lot of people like that around.

G: You weren't very exercised about that?

C: No, you just take it and run, you know.If you can produce your results, they're going to speak for themselves. There's no use arguing about stuff like that.

G: Well, I just wanted to clear that one up.

C: He left about 1967 or so, didn't he?

G: Yes. I think that was the time he was active over there, about that time. I don't know what context he came back into when he came back to the States.I don't know if he retired.

C: I think he did so that he could write, as I remember.

G: Okay. What haven't we talked about that you think needs to go on record?

(Interruption)

C: A rather, in my mind, poignant remark that must have been about 1970 or 1971 when I was going around the country with President Thieu. I had a conversation with one general who was working on the pacification, and he was happy. I guess it was about 1969 or 1970 when we really started getting in stride. He said, "This is the first time I've seen anything with this degree of cohesion and drive and initiative since the strategic hamlet program."The other interesting remark was a remark by President Thieu one time in which he mentioned President Diem, and he said, "He actually ran the country pretty well."

G: Thieu said that?

C: So I said--I don't know that Thieu said this, but I remember thinking it myself, "And you, Mr. Thieu, are running it approximately the way he did."

G: It was Colonel Thieu that furnished some key troops in 1963, wasn't it?

C: In 1963, yes. Oh, yes, sure. That's my point, that the overthrow of Diem was the worst mistake we made.

G: This is a terrible question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. How far back did it set us?

C: Well, clearly if President Johnson had not sent in the troops in 1965, the enemy would have won the war in early 1966 probably. If President Diem had not been killed, it was my feeling that we never would have gotten a large number of forces in there, that we might have lost the war--it was about a fifty-fifty per cent chance of it--that Diem would have suppressed the Buddhists--which I think he had successfully done in about September or October. He] would have cranked up the strategic hamlet program again and would have gotten some initiative going and had a fifty-fifty chance of reducing the enemy threat by about 1965 or 1966. On the other hand, they might have put in enough additional force to have made it beyond him to do alone, in which case, I don't think we would have had the compulsion that I think President Johnson felt that he had, because of our involvement with the Diem overthrow, to send our troops in to do it. I think in that case he, President Johnson, could have let the thing go down and said it wasn't his. He didn't cause it and that we'd done a fair, decent deal and we would have saved about ten years of war with all

the effects of it, especially the effects in the United States.

G: If Diem had been sustained. Could he have been sustained?

C: Yes, I think so. I think so. You would have had some troubles. President Kennedy or President Johnson--President Johnson would have had a fairly clear shot I think at, "Well, let's work out a very clear relationship here. We're not going to be totally responsible for everything he does, and I'm not going to be told by our press that I'm a monster just because I'm supporting these guys. But on the other hand, we'll support them to the extent that they'll fight for themselves, but we're not going to fight for them." And I think he could have avoided most of the rest of the war, which is a hell of a note.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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