INTERVIEW I

INTERVIEWEE: CHESTER COOPER

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

DATE: July 9, 1979

PLACE: Mr. Cooper's office in Arlington, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's begin by identifying you. You're Chester Cooper and during the Johnson Administration you served as a White House aide on the national security side of McGeorge Bundy's shop and then later with Mr. Harriman throughout the period 1966-67; then you came to the Institute for Defense analyses during 1967 where you still are.

C: Right.

M: Did you know Mr. Johnson at all in either his or your earlier career before he was President?

C: No. I didn't, except an occasional brush against him when he was Vice President.

M: When you were involved so heavily in the Indo-Chinese problem in the '50's for example, at the Geneva Conference did Mr. Johnson ever evidence any interest in that proceeding, as far as you know?

C: No.

M: Played no role in it at all?

C: No. There were some Senators at the Conference, especially at the closing stages, but Johnson wasn't among them.

M: Do you know the circumstances behind your recruitment for the White House job? How did you get approved for that job?

C: Well, my first job in the White House took place after the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was then Assistant Deputy Director for Intelligence of CIA, and after the Missile Crisis there was a felt need for closer coordination

between intelligence and policy. After the Cuban missile crisis I was assigned as an ex-officio member of Bundy's staff, providing the bridge between CIA's analysis and research and the NSC staff.

M: But you were still with the CIA?

C: Still with the CIA. In fact I wore two hats; a Bundy hat and a CIA hat. In the summer of '64 I was asked by the White House, Bundy in particular, if I would take over the job of coordinating the foreign policy aspects of Johnson's campaign speeches, and also to see if I could relate Humphrey's foreign policy to Johnson's campaign speeches. I was to try to insure that Johnson, to the extent that I could do anything about it, wouldn't say two different things about foreign policy on two successive days, and so that Humphrey wouldn't be saying one thing about, say, Germany, and Johnson yet another.

M: How successful was that? Mr. Johnson's noted for not always following the script.

C: That's right. I can't say that it was terribly successful, but I don't think there were any major goofs. Johnson didn't necessarily follow the script in every case, but so far as I was able to determine later, there weren't any major inconsistencies with what he would say about Indo-China or Germany or the Soviet Union, on Monday with what he said on Wednesday. Nor, so far as I was able to tell later, was Humphrey inconsistent with Johnson's line on any foreign policy issue. There were differences in emphasis and differences in degree of specificity, and occasionally some surprises, but there were no major inconsistencies.

M: I seem to remember--the reason I asked was that it got into the papers when William Bundy made a speech in Japan that seemed to be contrary to what Johnson was saying in his campaign speeches. The press made it a big thing.

C: That's right. It was awfully hard to--in fact it was hopeless--to expect every official of the government to say the same thing about the same issues, but that's characteristic of this government anyway, during election time or non-election periods. After the election, Bundy then asked me if I would move directly onto the White House staff--his staff--and take over the Asian responsibilities and for some reason which I don't understand except that I had some good relations with the Canadian Embassy here, I was also given Canada. So I had Asia and Canada.

M: That's quite a parlay.

C: Yes. In a sense this was a responsibility--except for Canada--that Mike Forrestal had had earlier; when he went over to the State Department I took over his responsibilities, adding Canada to them.

M: You make it sound pretty structured. Is that the case--was that the case with Bundy?

C: No. Well, looking back on it it was perhaps more structured than it seemed to be when one was there at the time. Bundy's shop in fact had major areas of emphasis; that doesn't mean that there weren't spill-overs, but, by and large, my responsibility was Asia and Canada, and under me I had somebody who concentrated on Viet Nam and another chap who concentrated on Asian problems outside of Viet Nam. [Robert] Komer had responsibility for the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa.

M: Corresponds to the ANE bureau in the State Department.

C: Right.

M: He had a big chunk.

C: Yes, he had a lot of real estate. He had a chap who concentrated on Africa and another chap who concentrated on the Middle East and South Asia.

M: How much personal contact with the President did a person at your level

in that shop have?

C: Well, a person at my level working on areas other than Asia which, in terms of my job ultimately meant spending about 80 percent of my time on Viet Nam, ordinarily would have had a fair amount of contact with the President. For example, Komer, I think did; the chap who handled Western Europe and the Soviet Union did. I was in a somewhat strange situation because Viet Nam became so operational that Bundy spent a very substantial proportion of his time on Viet Nam and much less on other hunks of the world that seemed to be less urgent. As I look back on it, I probably spent somewhat less time directly with the President than either of the other two senior men on Bundy's staff, but I spent more time with Bundy than did either of the other two. I suppose there must have been twenty occasions when I was directly involved with the President, some of them in larger groups, some of them smaller. It's probably fair to say that because of the peculiarity of the Viet Nam situation I spent more time with Bundy and less time with the President than the chaps handling other parts of the world.

M: How would you describe--I know it's very difficult to do in a few words--the status of what the Administration considered to be the commitment in Viet Nam at the beginning of the Administration, when you went to the White House in '64.

C: It was quite evident that President Johnson had inherited two problems about Viet Nam when he took over in November 1963. One was the credibility gap and the other was a vague, undefined, but fairly strong commitment. I think he nourished both the credibility gap and the commitment, but it's unfair to say that there was not a credibility gap between the

Administration and the American people during the Kennedy Administration, and it would be unfair to say there was not a strong and yet poorly articulated commitment. During the first many months of his Administration Johnson did nothing either very new or very definitive to try to reduce or indeed to increase our involvement. It was basically, from his point of view I think, a case of marking time.

M: Not changing course?

C: Not changing course until he came to grips with the guts of the problem himself. But the situation in Viet Nam wasn't standing still during that period, and in fact it was deteriorating pretty quickly; and he became more and more convinced that he had inherited a problem that was of much greater and much more serious proportions than I think he realized when he was Vice President. I really don't think he had any conception of how important that problem was.

M: Was anybody during those early months that you can recall advising Mr. Johnson to really reverse the commitment, to cut his losses and try to get out while the getting was good, so to speak?

C: No, I can't really think of anybody who was taking that view who was in the Administration. There were an awful lot of people in the peace movement and even in the government who were beginning to be very worried about it. But no one in the Administration was recommending that we get out. In fact, probably the reverse. I suspect that there were people who later had serious reservations about the whole business, but who in late '63 and early '64 were convinced that the new President had to demonstrate a sense of determination. And don't forget that the election was coming up yet in less than half a year.

M: Did that keep him from really engaging himself in the problem during that year, do you think?

C: I think it did. Certainly by mid-'64 he tended to be more and more preoccupied with the election, trying to make points here and there, and do something to get a domestic program moving, which was basically what he was interested in anyway. And I think to that extent, Viet Nam didn't get his full attention. Although there were so damn many crises that occurred in Viet Nam during that period it was inevitable that he had to give it a fair amount of time. But in the fall of '64 there were many situations which if an election were not coming up would probably have been handled differently.

M: Does that include Bien Hoa right before the election?

C: Yes, and some other attacks on American installations in Saigon; I suspect that some of the first tentative approaches toward a possible political settlement that U Thant and a few others were trying to promote might haven gotten a bit more attention in the fall of '64 if an election weren't coming up. More attention in part because the President would have had more time to address himself to it, and more attention too because he wouldn't always be looking over his shoulder at the possible implications for the election. Looking back on it, it's hard to imagine why he felt so nervous. Of course, Goldwater was really pressing him awfully hard, not in terms of votes, but in terms of rhetoric. And somehow Johnson while trying to maintain the image of being the moderate man nonetheless may have felt somewhat constrained not to do things, in terms of trying to get out or make a settlement, which he conceivably might have been more ready to do in other circumstances. But the polls were so much in favor of Johnson

that it's hard to believe, looking back on it now anyway, that he could have had any doubts that he could have won handily and that he had to worry about it. He probably could have done damn near anything except get us into a nuclear war or a horrible depression and it would not have really made any difference in terms of his being elected.

M: You served some time in this period--I'm not sure of the timing here--didn't you on a high-level review committee on Viet Nam under William Bundy along with John McNaughton and maybe Mike Forrestal.

C: Yes.

M: What was the charge for that group?

C: Well, basically to examine all options to see if we could get out of the apparent rut. Those options included, among other things, bombing attacks on North Viet Nam. We also examined possible contingencies, the "what if" kind of thing. And as a consequence of that there were a lot of plans, some of them quite wild, and some quite moderate, involving a much larger American military commitment in Vietnam.

M: Including land troops?

C: Including land troops; including naval blockade; and everything. But like many prepared papers in Washington, these were not recommended policies, these were just an exploration of possible military contingencies that might have to be met.

M: What was the timing of that group's operation?

C: Well, I'm not sure of the exact dates, but I suspect that most of it took place in late winter and spring of '64, and I guess that much of the work was finished by the late summer of '64, possibly September.

M: But before the elections?

C: Yes, the bulk of the work was done before the elections.

M: And the general conclusion was the policy more or less unchanged had to be continued?

C: Well, the group really was not charged to recommend a policy but to explore various alternative courses of action that could be undertaken. I think the general conclusion was that at least for the time being we ought to do more of the same, which was basically putting Americans in an advisory role. There were of course some new but not very consequential changes, not consequential in terms of affecting the situation on the ground, although consequential I think in terms of increasing the American presence and therefore the American stake and therefore the American commitment. And that was to send in more advisers, send in more pilots, have the advisers do more to move from advice to direction and from direction perhaps even to command in some instances. It's a very tricky and not a very well defined role that these poor guys had out there. It depended to a very considerable extent on the guy himself, some of them were perfectly content to stay in the headquarters of a Vietnamese division and act as kind of a consultant, some others were much more highly charged and were ready to get out with the troops and virtually take command.

M: That's the role Colonel Corson has been so hard on in that book of his [The Betrayal], the impossibility of that position.

C: Right, exactly; it was a terrible position. It depended not only on the guy but on his Vietnamese opposite numbers, on the military situation on the ground, on how he interpreted his orders, and so forth. I don't know how we could ever have expected that there would be a kind of a uniform policy to be followed on the basis of the squashy, very poorly articulated, very poorly understood (poorly understood by both the Americans and the Vietnamese) guidance as to what military advisers were supposed to do there.

M: You were out there when the first bombing of the North began after the attack on Pleiku?

C: Yes.

M: Was it understood before you and McGeorge Bundy went that the policy of bombing had been decided upon?

C: No. Absolutely not. With the exception of Bundy and McNamara, I probably know more about this particular point than anybody; and there has been an awful lot of false stuff about this.

M: That's the purpose of this project.

C: Right. Bundy took the initiative with McNamara's encouragement of proposing to the President that he go out there for an on-the-spot look; this was in late January [1965]. He felt that here it was, January '65, and American policy was really kind of stuck. There were an awful lot of contingency plans such as I described, there were now some honest doubts as to where we were going and whether we could get there in terms of the policy we had in mind, there were some very serious doubts about the stability of the Viet Nam government. The South Vietnamese troops weren't doing well and the situation looked very unpromising indeed. Bundy wrote a memorandum to the President which said in effect what I've just said, and he also noted that within the top echelons of the government there was a feeling of confusion. He pointed out that McNamara was very gung-ho and in fact had taken charge of the whole business, which basically was true at that point; and that Rusk and the State Department generally seemed to be very uncertain and had virtually defaulted on his leadership role in terms of the political problems there; that it was high time now that the President had been inaugurated, now that he had gotten the Budget message and State of the Union message out of the way, to really concentrate on

where we were going in Viet Nam. And he reminded the President, that there were three options, and that the President really ought to decide which of these he wanted to follow. One was a much more aggressive approach to war; one was a very substantial deescalation leading to disengagement; and the third was an attempt to do what in effect we had been doing, only more effectively. I don't think it was in this memo, in fact I'm sure it wasn't, but I think there was a feeling that somehow the middle course, doing what we were doing, was not going to work; and that basically the President had to make up his mind as to whether he wanted to disengage or do something a lot more substantial. And Bundy--this was in this memo--Bundy noted that he had never been out to Viet Nam, never been out to Asia as a matter of fact, and he ought to go out, take a fresh look, and come back with some specific recommendations as to where we should go from here. In short, he did not go out with his mind made up that we should proceed on the bombing track. And in fact this was one of the few trips I have ever taken of this nature where on the way out, one didn't write the report on what would be recommended when one came back. This tends to be more often true than not. But it wasn't true on this occasion. What in fact happened, when we got out there, Bundy got a fairly good feel for the political and military situations in the sense that we got briefed up to our ears by both the Americans and Vietnamese. We talked to the then Vietnamese government, and since the Buddhists were making trouble, Bundy spent a fair amount of time talking to Buddhists. The situation really looked pretty sour. There was a general disposition after we were there for several days to feel that the original conception was right, either we had to get out or do something more than we were doing. And that this business of putting in a few thousand more advisers was not going to turn

the thing around. We had been in Saigon for several days before we began to think about the report Bundy would make to the President.

One of the things that distressed the Embassy was that there had been a whole series of atrocities and major terrorists acts against not only Vietnamese, but American installations which we had pretty much taken lying down. And it was thought that some kind of retaliation should be undertaken; retaliation against the Viet Cong was pretty difficult, in part because nobody knew where in the hell they were and they didn't own anything to retaliate against. However, it was becoming increasingly clear that behind the Viet Cong was Hanoi and if we could somehow get Hanoi to turn the thing off, or at least simmer it down, the situation would be manageable in South Viet Nam. Whether that's true or not I still am not sure. But anyway, that was our feeling. As I remember it we had planned to leave Viet Nam on the day after Tet ended [Sunday]. On that Saturday I started to sketch out the report. And one of the things that I began to sketch out was a policy of retaliation. Now I didn't have any of the stuff with me that had been worked on by Bill Bundy's task group; some of it had, of course, stuck in my mind but it had been many months since I had last seen it. Nonetheless--I suppose because of that--there was some similarity between what I wrote as a first draft on that Saturday and some of the stuff that had been developed over the previous summer. But it was done pretty much de novo. Basically what the first draft contained was a "scenario" for retaliation against major atrocities in the South. And this was retaliation that was pretty much a tit-for-tat kind of bombing operation against the North, highly selective, related in time and in terms of target (with some exceptions which I'll mention in a moment) to the kind of operations that the Communists were engaged in in the South. There are several aspects of this that I can recall. My first draft which I then

rewrote was originally related to attacks against American installations and then that seemed to be a bit too self-serving; so we broadened it--I broadened it--to attacks against American installations and South Vietnamese civilian groups. These would be prima facie justifications for a retaliation. The reason that I selected the South Vietnamese civilian group was that, after all, there was a war going on in South Viet Nam and you couldn't justify attacking North Viet Nam simply because a South Vietnamese military unit was attacked--that was the name of the game.

M: Hardly an atrocity.

C: Hardly. So these were the two: American military installations and South Vietnamese civilians. Then there was the problem of what kind of an attack. Obviously you couldn't make a big production out of the fact that some kid on a bicycle tossed a grenade into an American backyard nor could you make a big production out of the fact that some village policeman was kidnapped. Basically what we were talking about, what I had in mind, was the bombing of an American billet, or a movie theatre, or a Chinese restaurant, or the mining of a road with the result that a busload of people got killed. So that was the basic rationale for a retalization policy.

Then the real problem that we had was strictly in terms of American domestic reaction to--and world wide reaction. You just couldn't start bombing North Viet Nam, de novo. In order to launch such a major new step, the Communists had to do something so atrocious that there would be justification for an attack on North Viet Nam. The thought was that we would take our lumps until something very dramatic and very obscene occurred. And then we would be able to justify this new, admittedly risky, possibly very unpopular policy.

M: That's at the point that Pleiku then occurred?

C: Exactly. That was Sunday morning. On Saturday night we went over this draft; Bundy, McNaughton, Alex Johnson and one or two others were there. They agreed that this seemed to be a fairly sensible first approach. The thought was on Sunday, which was expected to be a very quiet day, Mac would get out into the country and see some of the villages, and I and one or two others would work on this draft on the basis of the discussions we had Saturday night. We would meet again later on Sunday, get the Embassy's chop, and polish it up on the way home. We planned to stop some place, I forget where, Alaska or Honolulu, for a day or two, fix up the report and have it ready when we got home. Well, on Sunday morning there was the Pleiku incident, and that pulled the rug out from any sitting and waiting. That was in the eyes of Americans, at least the Administration, sufficient justification to do something drastic, so there we were. And then there were two other bombings of American billets within 24-36 hours.

M: It became inescapable.

C: Right.

M: That was unanimous advice from the field at least that this was the time?

C: There was absolutely no question in Saigon about this. Most of Sunday was spent trying to determine exactly what in hell had happened in Pleiku, and what was going on elsewhere and in trying to keep Washington, which was then in the middle of a NSC meeting, informed, and trying to coordinate our group and its recommendations with the developments in Washington.

M: The way you lead up to it as a kind of careful development would tend to give the lie to those accounts at least one of which emphasizes the emotionalism that Bundy got involved in. It might be useful to get a denial on that, if indeed that is what you implied.

C: I just don't--there wasn't any sort of a great trauma in terms of Bundy's

losing his cool. I've seen Bundy under a fair amount of stress and he just doesn't panic--I don't know what goes on in his stomach, but he really doesn't lose his cool, and he didn't then. There's just no question about that. There was obviously great tension. Bundy had, you know, visited the hospital and seeing these guys--well, affected him the way it affects everybody else. It's not a very pleasant sight and not a very pleasant experience, but I don't think it affected his recommendations. I think one of the things that made him less than completely relaxed was the fact that here was this obviously well-planned, highly provocative attack that must have been getting a hell of a lot of steam underway during the Tet cease-fire.

M: We didn't have a fixed response either.

C: No. Exactly. We had nothing available. There are some people who say that the troops up at Pleiku were very relaxed about their security, but that's simply a reflection on the extent of their military alertness, and it has nothing to do with the sheer brass and the complete disregard of the Viet Cong for any of the consequences that might follow. They probably felt that we might turn the other cheek again. I'm convinced myself, I may be wrong about this, that the option of disengagement or at least the possibility of a serious consideration of disengagement or a scaling down was a live one even while we were in Viet Nam, up until the Pleiku attack. My own private theory is that if the Viet Cong had chosen an entirely different approach at that stage of the game, it's conceivable that Johnson might have been ready to back off rather than move ahead on the escalatory track. If for example, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese had decided to lay off the Americans and concentrate their energies on the South Vietnamese military, concentrate on subversion in Saigon, concentrate

on Buddhist discontent, it's barely possible that some of us who at that point were beginning to have some serious doubts about where the hell we were going in Viet Nam and serious doubts about the advisability of sinking more in there, would have gotten more of a hearing than any one with that point of view could have had after the attack on Pleiku.

M: That just more or less ended that option.

C: That ended that option, and I'm convinced that that option still had some life in it even as of Saturday, February 6, or whatever the date was.

M: Well, what happens then--does that retaliatory decision just sort of slide into policy of continuation?

C: Yes. Well, that was one of the problems that the Administration had. It seemed unable to pull up its socks and figure out just exactly what the bombing of Viet Nam was supposed to accomplish. It went through various explanatory phases, and I think this was one of the reasons why Johnson began to lose his credibility. There was for a time, perhaps about ten days after the bombing started, a stated rationale of retaliation; there was a bookkeeping operation going on, in which CIA made a daily list of atrocities; a train blown up, or a bus knocked off, that sort of thing. The thought was that we perhaps would even scale up or scale down the level of bombing in direct response to the atrocities to demonstrate that it wouldn't pay. There was even some thought given to the tit-for-tat idea; and if they blew up a train, we'd dump bombs on their railroad; if they blew up a barracks we'd bomb one of their barracks. But this became a little precious and hard to develop. They blow up a restaurant--what the hell you going to do! Try to bomb a restaurant? So for these first ten days or so there was the question of trying to adjust the scale and timing of bombing attacks, but this quickly

slid into a much more sustained effort. And then, I think it was about February 28, but anyway toward the end of February, when the President or McNamara told the press conference that what we really wanted to do with our bombing attacks was to get Hanoi to negotiate.

M: That was an entirely different thing.

C: Entirely different altogether. And that theme came up, time and time again. Yet while we were saying that there were others who said, "By God, we wanted to punish Hanoi until they realized that the North Vietnamese knew they couldn't do this kind of thing in the South on the cheap."

M: This is what you have mentioned as confusion of goals in an article [in Foreign Affairs]?

C: Exactly. Right. And then there was yet another rationale which the military maintained, particularly, that what we were trying to do was literally to prevent the flow of men and supplies South. So that you had four or five different themes used to justify the bombing. In a sense I suppose all of them were part of the rationale, and yet people looking back on it now are wiser than they were at the time. Some of them say, "If we'd only decided what the hell we wanted to accomplish by the bombing we might have developed a much more sophisticated approach toward it." We'd choosethe targets more carefully, we'd orchestrate the bombing with political or diplomatic developments, and so forth.

M: This same thing happened then in regard to the introduction of American combat units. It just flows naturally from the necessity to guard the staging areas for the bombing. And it's never again a big confrontation decision, it's just one of the things that slides into being over a period of time?

C: Yes. I think the decision on ground forces was also a kind of sliding decision, too; although the rationale was obviously different. The point is that once you break through from giving advice into active combat you're playing another ball game altogether. Once you decide that you're going to bomb, and you put some planes on some air fields, then you have to have some guys in there to guard the air fields. Then it's simply not a question of posting MP's at the gate of the air field, you're putting combat troops around the perimeter of the air field; and then if somebody lobs a shell onto the air field from beyond the perimeter you mount some operations. Then it turns out that you have to have logistics troops in there to keep the air fields and the guys guarding the air fields supplied; and then of course you have to have some other characters in there to guard the logistics troops.

M: Then you have 525,000.

C: Right. Then you have 525,000. This really is a slippery slope. As a matter of fact, the case could be made that if you have 525,000 that's probably not enough. If you want to fight that kind of war. That, I think, was one of Johnson's mistakes--one could argue that he doled these troops out really in very small amounts. His technique was to drag Westmoreland or Abrams or somebody around in front of television cameras and say, "I'm giving you what you want, am I not," (remembering I think the problems Truman had with McArthur). But by and large, if these guys were to--as I think [Adm. U. S. Grant] Sharp has already indicated, now that he has retired--<u>really</u> level, they would say, "Hell, no, Mr. President, you're <u>not</u> giving me what I want. I've asked for a lot more." And in point of fact, if you want to fight this kind of war maybe we should have had 750,000 troops in there, or a million, or God knows how

many. The fact is that it was quite clear that 100,000 couldn't do it and 300,000 couldn't do it; and I think it's also quite clear that 500,000 couldn't do it. And the real question was, "What were we trying to do, and was this in fact what we really wanted to do?"

M: Again, never quite decided specifically at the time the decisions were being made.

C: Right. Exactly.

M: When did important people begin to express serious doubts? Was it during the summer of '65 when the troop commitments began to get rather large?

C: I think so. There were--I would not classify myself as an important person--but having said that, I can document some very serious doubts I had in '64, in terms of whether it was worth the candle and what in the hell we were trying to do, and so forth. But I think the doubts began to creep in among a few people, strangely enough not so much in the State Department but in the Pentagon.

M: McNaughton's shop, particularly?

C: And McNamara himself, I think. My own feeling is that McNamara began to have some very restless nights at the end of '65. The end of '65, don't forget, was a rather traumatic date for McNamara. That was the time when he had said that most of our troops would be out, and I'm sure that must have haunted him. He made a trip to Viet Nam in November or early December of '65. And what the hell; here we'd been bombing since February, almost a year now. Our troops in Viet Nam by the end of '65 were probably close to 200,000. We were engaged in major military operations. We had increased the supply and training of South Vietnamese troops. And the situation hadn't improved perceptibly, and there was no greater reason to believe we'd be out two or three years hence than there was when he first said

that we'd be out in '65. I think that's when he really began to have some doubts. The Honolulu conference of February '66 was basically, you recall, geared to revolutionary development and non-military things, in part to counteract the effect of the resumption of bombing again after the pause of '65-'66. During that Honolulu conference, McNamara played a low-keyed role. But he did tell some reporters on a background basis in Honolulu that he thought that anybody who felt that the bombing of North Viet Nam was going to solve anything significant was all wet. He was talking to reporters who had come from Saigon with Ky. Ky had given them a large dose of "More bombing, more escalation," and these reporters asked McNamara about it.

M: He had apparently been one of the major proponents of the pause back in December.

C: Yes. The pause back in December and January was an example of how decisions were made on Viet Nam by sliding, slipping into them. The original idea was that there would be a brief pause in the ground action over Christmas and that there would be another day or two of pause in the air action. But while the pause in the ground fighting was a very precisely defined period of time the air pause was not quite so precisely defined. I was in Bundy's office on the day after Christmas when the President called.

M: He was at the ranch?

C: He was at the ranch, right. And it was strictly a kind of "Merry-Christmas-did-you-have-a-nice-holiday," kind of call; but the President also apparently asked Bundy when the air attacks would begin again. Remember, this was on the 26th. Bundy said that he wasn't sure, and he asked me whether I had seen any "execute" orders for the bombing to start again. I

hadn't seen any, but told Bundy that they might be on their way over from the Joint Chiefs, or they might be even in Bundy's office. I took a quick look around Bundy's office in the West Basement and couldn't find anything. So Bundy then said he'd call the President back. We decided to see if McNamara knew when the bombing was to start. Bundy called McNamara, and McNamara apparently said, "Jesus, I don't know, I haven't seen anything yet." We then had a quick exchange and we decided, if there were no orders to start the bombing, to see if we could continue the pause for a bit. Bundy then called the President and said that there weren't any orders to start again, but he and McNamara, in the light of a lot of the information about the possibility of getting a positive reaction from Hanoi, thought that it wouldn't do any harm to keep the pause going for awhile--perhaps until New Year's. The President said he would think about it. I'm not quite sure what happened after that except that, as I recall, on the night of the 27th orders went out that the bombing was to be halted until further notice.

M: A more specific thing.

C: It didn't give any specific date. And then it was decided to send the flying circus around. And so out fanned Harriman, and so forth.

M: Bundy, and others.

C: Right. And that lasted, as you know, until the 27th or 28th of January.

M: So again there wasn't a great debate on the decision.

C: There was no debate, we just literally slid into it. The decision to start the bombing again in part was based on growing impatience by J hnson and virtually everybody else. Nothing was happening; and moreover there was a very tough letter that Ho had sent the Pope, saying it was all a fraud and he wouldn't have any part of it.

M: So it wasn't even necessary to have a great debate to start it again.

C: Right. I tried in a last gasp to keep the pause going for another ten days. I didn't have any illusions that I would be successful but Wilson was going to be in Moscow in early February. He was anxious to get some movement toward a conference; as you remember, the British and Russians were co-chairmen of the Geneva conference. I felt that if we kept the pause going for this long, another week or ten days wouldn't change the course of the war. Perhaps if Wilson could go to Moscow and deal with the Russians under the circumstances of a bombing pause rather than a bombing resumption, he could spark something. But that idea had a half-life of about an hour, and the bombing started.

M: The President really thought he hadn't accomplished anything by this pause?

C: That's right. He was told by some of his friends that the pause was his greatest mistake, and that he was led down the garden path by the doves at home and the frauds abroad. So he took a very dim view of it. And then he dreamed up the Honolulu conference. There was a great outcry about the resumption of the bombing.

M: Also it conveniently coincided with the Fulbright hearings as it turned out, which had to be a consideration.

C: Right.

M: What about your estimate of the genuine willingness to negotiate at that time? Suppose we had gotten a bite from the other side during that circus, were we prepared then to actually negotiate on a realistic quid pro quo basis?

C: Well, if we had gotten a bite, if we'd gotten a secret bite--one that we were sure that would have been kept secret, we <u>may</u> have decided to wiggle

off the hook, I'm not sure. I'm just not sure how anxious we were to negotiate, to tell you the truth.

M: Had you been involved in some of the earlier efforts--the [J. Blair] Seaborn mission in '64, and the [Edmund] Gullion one in '65?

C: Yes.

M: How much substance was there in those attempts?

C: Well, the government, and particularly the President, had I guess basically a case of schizophrenia about all of this. We were anxious to get out, because it looked like a very expensive, risky, and not very promising enterprise. And yet to get out under the kind of arrangements that seemed probable in terms of our current relative bargaining power didn't seem to be a very good prospect, either. So there we were, caught between these two desires. One, to keep a non-Communist government in power; and another, to get out. And they seemed to be mutually exclusive. I suspect the more publicized the bite the more difficult it was for us to wiggle out of it; because, you know, "Anywhere, anytime; unconditional talks," and so forth. The more private the bite, I suspect the more we would have tried to probe and see what was involved and to delay any positive response. I may be doing the whole "peace effort" of January 1966 some injustice. If we had gotten a substantial response from Hanoi, we probably would have talked, but actually, the efforts in December of '65 and January '66 were not the kind that would be likely to elicit a response. They were just much too flamboyant, noisy, more form than substance. In fact, some place in the Austin files is a memorandum to Bundy which describes two approaches to the extended pause. It pointed out that we could undertake a "cosmetic" approach or we could really do some genuine searching and probing; and that these called for two

different sets of actions. If we were genuinely interested in negotiations, in addition to simply saying we were interested in negotiations, the flying circus was not as important as quiet diplomacy; but if we just wanted to make the case that we were doing everything we could publicly, then, add some more airplanes and more VIP's and some more noise. That was one of the problems with the December '65-January '66 effort. I think the possibilities of getting a quiet response were very remote simply because of the way we went about the whole business.

M: Had we missed something in the Seaborn episode, do you think?

C: The Seaborn thing, not really. The Seaborn thing was really an attempt to try to find out what the hell was on Hanoi's mind.

M: Not really to get a negotiating--

C: No. Really, just to begin to get the beginning of the start of the commencement of some quiet dialogue rather than to spark a negotiation. In a sense the Seaborn thing was not unlike the Lewandowski attempt, which was--

M: Earlier?

C: No. When Lewandowski was just going back and forth to Hanoi in the summer of 1966, when the talks between Lodge, Lewandowski and D'Orlandi in Saigon were just beginning. Lewandowski was trying to find out what Lodge had on his mind and really to start something of an indirect dialogue. It was only later in the Lewandowski thing that something more nourishing took place. I think that was pretty much the rationale for the Seaborn thing, unlike the attempts that [Chester] Ronning made to see if he could really get something more robust going. The sights we had on the Seaborn effort were pretty low.

M: Was the same thing true with the Gullion one the following year?

C: The basic problem was how one was able to separate the signals from static on both sides, and it was hoped that by getting somebody who was an accurate reporter and genuinely interested in finding out something useful, we could begin to define what Hanoi was really interested in, and somehow get to Hanoi some of the thoughts that we had.

M: Communications, more than peace initiatives?

C: Right.

M: And it turned out substantially nothing?

C: Nothing.

M: So you don't think we did miss--

C: Not on the Seaborn thing. No, absolutely.

M: You left the White House when, January-February of '66?

C: I left in April of '66.

M: Was this largely because of your growing disenchantment with the way things were going?

C: Yes.

M: Did you make this clear to people in the White House at the time?

C: Yes. In fact I had decided to leave in about late November of '65 and agreed to stay on until April. I had a problem of whether I should leave making a lot of noise or just leaving period. And I decided, frankly, not to make a lot of noise in part because, what the hell difference did my departure make? There were a lot of reporters whom I knew who were anxious for me to say something very critical. They would get a day's story out of it; but I was more interested, frankly, in trying to see what I could do quietly rather than making--

M: It also made it possible for you to come back here with the Harriman group--

C: Yes.

M: How was that group put together? Did Mr. Harriman do that on his own authority?

C: Yes.

M: This is late summer of '66?

C: This is late summer of '66. Somehow, and it's hard to figure out how, because there's nothing in writing as far as I know, the President indicated that he would like to have Harriman "in charge of peace." Now I don't know whether he was serious about it or not, and I don't know whether he consulted Rusk about it, or even Rostow about it, or not; and I don't know whether it was simply because Harriman was highly regarded by a lot of people who didn't regard Johnson very highly at that point, and he felt he needed to pull another rabbit out of the hat. But anyway--

M: The mandate wasn't clear at all?

C: The mandate wasn't clear at all. It wasn't in writing. But anyway Harriman discovered that he was in charge of peace. Well, that's all Harriman needs. He took it seriously, very seriously, to the extent that it was possible for him to do this with this position that he had. He called me and asked me if I would come back. I gave him only three conditions under which I came back: one, that I would work for Harriman and not for Rostow; secondly, that I would concentrate on negotiations and not on any other aspect of Viet Nam; and thirdly, that when I was convinced that there was nothing to it, either because Harriman really had no mandate, or because no one was interested, I would feel free to leave. I joined Harriman in August of '66 and I left in October of '67.

M: Was Marigold the Harriman group's first chance?

C: No. Actually Harriman didn't even know about Marigold except--

M: That says something about his mandate right there.

C: Right. Well, in a sense Harriman and I got Marigold started. But let's start from the beginning. The first major task we had was in late September when Goldberg came down to Washington from New York and said that U Thant had just come back from Moscow and was convinced that the Russians were ready to use their influence and do something with Hanoi. U Thant had asked Goldberg if he couldn't have something useful to pass on to the Russians to get talks going. Harriman and I took this very seriously--Incidentally Harriman's staff consisted of me, period.

M: Oh, it was not a large group?

C: No. We organized a kind of marching and chowder society, which we called the Negotiations Group that consisted of Bill Bundy, Ben Read, Joe Sisco, and Tom Hughes, and one or two others*-Gene Rostow, occasionally. But anyway we decided that it was important to do something on the UN track. First of all we had been giving U Thant a very hard time and now we suddenly discovered that he wanted to leave; and it was important that he felt that he could have a role and that we took him seriously. Secondly, things looked pretty dry and barren then, and if there was something we could give Goldberg to give U Thant to give the Russians to give Hanoi, that might get something going, it seemed useful. The problem was to put forward something both robust and new and also something we could get people to stand behind in Washington. And we finally settled on something that had been kicking around for quite awhile but had never been released. That was our version of Hanoi's four points. Hanoi kept insisting on that the settlement be based on their four points. We had never addressed them frontally; we always said, "Well, we can live with some of them, we can't live with others," or, "We'll consider your four points in addition

* Thompson and Unger

to other points." But we never really zeroed in on them. So we told Goldberg that maybe we could do something on that line. Goldberg seemed to be satisfied with that. We developed an alternative wording to Hanoi's four points; and, as I remember it, the major rewording was in the third of their points which had to do with the NLF being the only people in the act. I brought this up to Goldberg, who in turn gave it to U Thant, who said that he thought this was very good indeed.

M: You had gotten some agreement in Washington?

C: There wasn't too much opposition on this. There had never been, really. Goldberg gave it to U Thant, and Goldberg later said U Thant seemed to be pleased about it and that he would give it to the Russians. I don't know whether he ever did give it to the Russians. And it's conceivable that something useful may have happened out of this because a few months later the Russians provided the first hint that the North Vietnamese in Moscow would be willing to answer the door if we knocked in Moscow. That was in December of '66, when we had these few sessions with the North Vietnamese Chargé in Moscow. And it's possible that that may have started--there were a few other things that could have explained this--but it's conceivable that the U Thant-Goldberg contact may have started it.

M: But you never got a direct response?

C: No. We never knew whether the Russians ever got it, or what happened.

M: That brings us right to the edge of Marigold. Would it be possible for me to come back to one more similar session to this?

C: Yes.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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By Chester L. Cooper

to the

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