

INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: PHILLIP DAVIDSON
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

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- G: Would you begin by giving us a brief outline of your experience in military intelligence?
- D: I think, really, it's got to go back almost to the outset of my career in the army. I joined the army as a second lieutenant of horse cavalry, and one of the primary functions of the horse cavalry is reconnaissance of the enemy. So almost from the outset, a cavalry officer is pointed in the direction of intelligence. Then in World War II, I was a squadron commander and a regimental executive officer of a light armored reconnaissance regiment, the Third Cavalry.
- G: Was that part of [George] Patton's outfit?
- D: Yes, indeed, that was part of Patton's outfit. As a matter of fact, Patton at one time had been the regimental commander of the Third Cavalry, in the pre-World War II days.

After the war I went to Leavenworth, and upon graduation from Leavenworth was picked up in the staff and faculty in the School of Intelligence. At that time I had no real intelligence experience; my experience had been with the horses and light armor. Nevertheless, I spent two years on the faculty there in the School of Intelligence. While there, another instructor in that school, later Major General

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Bob Glass, and I wrote a book called Intelligence Is for Commanders. It sold pretty well; it's long since out of print now, but it sold pretty well. It was conceived to be a classic textbook on the rudiments of intelligence.

From there, I went to General [Douglas] MacArthur's headquarters in the Far East Command in Tokyo, and again in the G-2 section, under a Major General Charles A. Willoughby [?], one of the most striking characters that the army ever had. There I was chief of the Plans and Estimates Section, which means that you take intelligence from all sources and you try to figure out what the enemy is doing. Upon completion of that detail, I went back as an instructor at West Point, then to the Army War College. Then there were a series of other assignments without being related to intelligence, until finally in the early sixties, I took over as commandant of the U.S. Army Security Agency School and Training Center at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. The Army Security Agency deals, among other things, with the intercept of enemy electronic communications. So I was back into the business at this time.

I was then promoted brigadier general, went to Fort Dix as the assistant training center commander, and then as the G-2 of U.S. Army, Pacific at Fort Shafter, replacing Major General McChristian. I replaced Joe again in Saigon in 1967, stayed there until 1969 as J-2 MACV, came back and took command of Fort Ord, which was the biggest training center in the country. Then [I] again replaced General McChristian as the assistant chief of staff, intelligence, of the

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army, which is the army's G-2. Finally I went up as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence in the secretary of defense's office, from which I retired in 1974.

G: All right, sir. Is it accurate to say that your first involvement in intelligence regarding Vietnam was when you were at USARPAC?

D: Yes. That's true. You don't watch it with the single focus that the J-2 MACV watches it, because that's the whole game there. The G-2, U.S. Army, Pacific, has a host of other rat holes to watch, as well. Korea, for example, can always explode under you. China was in his bailiwick, the Soviet Far East, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, et cetera, all throughout the Pacific area. So he doesn't concentrate on it with the intensity that the J-2 MACV [does], but, yes, I followed it very closely; we had morning briefings similar to what they had in Saigon.

G: Now, if I have the chronology right, you went out in the spring of 1967 to Saigon, is that correct?

D: That's true. As I recall, late May.

G: I presume you had a picture fairly well formed of the intelligence situation. Did the situation that you discovered more or less fit the picture?

D: Yes. You see, this is one of the things that instant communications and mass communication does, that the same materials are largely available throughout the intelligence community. I had not concentrated on it to have formed definite opinions, and this was a conscious act. I really wanted to get out and get the feel in Vietnam,

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and the division commanders and their intelligence officers, something that I'd had only limited ability to do. I think it might be pertinent to know that while I was G-2 ARPAC, I had made several visits to Saigon, just to keep my hand in on that particular thing.

G: Were there any surprises awaiting you? Did your in-country briefing--?

D: Well, this is an interesting thing. The in-country briefing was quite sparse. The chiefs, all full colonels, of the various branches under General McChristian, for example: counterintelligence, collection, administration, positive intelligence--or combat intelligence--all came in and briefed about their organization and their activities and this sort of thing. But I remember thinking at the time that it was largely superfluous. These men, as is always the case, they were more trying to size me up than inform me. You know, here's somebody that's devilishly important to them that's come in now; what kind of a guy have we got to work with here? They knew McChristian, they knew his good points and his bad points, but here's a new fellow. And I didn't know any of them.

Joe and I would have very informal conferences. We lived together in a house in Saigon for this one week overlap, only one week. And we would sit around maybe with a drink before dinner and talk very informally about the problems in organization, personnel. Again, though, I didn't think that this was particularly informative. Joe is inclined to play his cards very close to his vest, and he's a loner and I think essentially by nature mistrustful. He's not going to give you anything.

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G: Is that a common trait with intelligence officers?

D: No, no, this is a particular, peculiar trait, I think, with this gentleman.

So at the end of one week, he in effect excuses himself, and says, "General [William] Westmoreland has let me leave a week early because my daughter's going to get married, and so, well, here it is, it's yours." We weren't going to get any better briefed than we were, so I said hail and goodbye and let's get on with it. He told me just as he went out the door, "Incidentally, Secretary [Robert] McNamara will be here next week, and you're going to have to brief him." Even looking back all these years later, I can remember what a shock that was. Because McNamara was known for the ferociousness of his questions, his penetrating ability.

G: Had you ever briefed him before?

D: No, no I hadn't. Although I'd worked in his office, I hadn't briefed him. Nevertheless, he didn't come out; that's when some war in the Middle East erupted. So it was July or roughly a month later before he got out there, which--you'd be surprised how something like that concentrates the mind. So a month later I was in good shape. That's the briefing that's now in the Pentagon Papers.

G: I see.

D: Now, to show you the difference of preparation, let me detail the regimen that I insisted my replacement go through, General Potts [?]. In the first place, I said, "I want him on post here three months before I turn it over." I wanted to go thoroughly, a thorough trip,

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throughout Vietnam. I wanted him to talk to everybody in various phases of intelligence and combat operations. He's got to get thoroughly imbued with the details. You really couldn't hold that job until you could recall the most minute details of where some outfit was located and what it was and all of this; it just takes a lot of time. General [Creighton] Abrams, who was the commander at that time, said, "I thoroughly agree with you; we've got to have an ongoing intelligence outfit so there'll be no slips. The day you walk out the door, he has just got to be fully prepared."

G: Now, this was early 1969?

D: This was 1969, now. But I merely bring this up to show you the difference in preparation. And again, to be honest with you, I felt my preparation had been most inadequate.

G: In what respect? You lacked the feel that you thought you needed?

D: Yes. I didn't think I had the intimacy that I had a month later, for example, when you really were on.

I found there were some other problems. General McChristian is a great organizer, and I've paid public tribute to him on many occasions for the organization he set up over there. When he went in in 1965, there wasn't anything. But that's his forte and they had the right man for the job. He loves to build big buildings and great big units and empires, because he thinks finally you can overpower this intelligence problem if you can just get enough money and enough buildings and enough people. To some extent, it's probably true.

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So I inherited a marvelous organization: unwieldy, too many people--which I managed to get rid of very quickly--but I found that there was a very key area of deficiency. That is, this information poured in and was processed and whatnot, but not very much use was made of it. In other words, the estimate capacity, the capability, was, I thought, quite weak. They wrote a speech for me to give to McNamara, and this was written by the estimates section, a group of singularly incompetent lieutenant colonels. After I read the briefing I called them all in, and I said, "You're all fired. Out." I realized either I was going to have to do it myself or I was going to have to get some hotshots in there. So I got two of them, the two best in the army: Charley Morris, whose name I've already given you, and the other is Danny Graham, both of them excellent intelligence officers; both of them had worked for me and knew how I worked; both of them very strong in the estimative capability, which gave three of us, because my background had been in that area, too, from my days under General MacArthur. Well, we wrote a very fine briefing, if I say it myself with some immodesty, which you'll find on page 518 of the Pentagon Papers, Volume IV, the Gravel edition. I happen to remember that, not through any pique of immodesty, but because I had to look it up the other day to give to Mr. [Don] Kowet from TV Guide, who is investigating this whole [Mike] Wallace-Westmoreland thing.

There were minor reorganizations, but nothing major. Joe had left a very fine organization. Joe and I are classmates; we're friends, not close friends. We certainly have had our share of

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professional disagreements. But on the other hand, I know he was the one that recommended to General Westmoreland that I replace him, and he recommended me as the most competent man to act as his replacement. You'll note that the peculiar nature--that he managed to delete himself there as the most competent man. It's just a peculiarity of the man.

G: Can we pursue something that you touched on? You said that you were bothered by the fact that not enough use was being made of all of this information that was being poured into the intelligence machine, as it were. Does this mean that the commander was not acting on finished intelligence?

D: No. He was. And I thought as I went by that probably was going to have to be clarified. I'm glad you brought us back to it. The use, as I see it, is that in the estimate forecast area, Joe had a very firm belief that you should not attempt to forecast enemy operations. He much preferred the old capabilities doctrine, which was taught for years in our service schools. The only trouble is, by and large, no commander is going to put up with it. You say, well, the enemy is capable of doing this, or this, or this, and from the evidence it appears that he is most likely to do this. But you never really come down on anything. I found, particularly with Abrams, but to a lesser extent with Westmoreland, that they, like any commander, wanted to know "What the hell do you think he's going to do? We know you haven't got any crystal ball, but what do you--come on! Don't just stand back there and hide behind Field Manual 30-5."

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Now, Joe was able to get away with it, and this brings up an interesting point which ought to be in your files. The reason he was able to get away with it was the institution of a device called "The Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update." I've never seen anything like it in any other headquarters, and it really is the most efficient thing to transmit intelligence I've seen. General McChristian said he instituted it; General Westmoreland on another occasion said he instituted it. I would give both of them about equal credit for it, and certainly it is credit.

The way it worked was this. Every Saturday morning at eight o'clock, we held a conference down in the all-source, top secret briefing room, with charts, maps, slides, you know, the usual paraphernalia, which was attended by the commander--and I'll use General Westmoreland as the commander--the deputy, General Abrams; the deputy for pacification, Mr. [Robert] Komer; the commander of the Seventh Air Force, General [William] Momyer or General [George] Brown, as the case may be; the commander of the naval forces in Vietnam, and the key MACV staff officers. The J-2 was responsible for presenting a one-hour briefing, generally done by so-called area experts, likely to be very bright young officers of about captain or major. The briefing was formal, but the questions were informal. Anybody could stop any time and say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Why do you say that?" And somebody else from another side of the table says, "Well, I agree with Phil Davidson down here." And the other guy would say, "I don't. Wait a minute now." Pretty soon you had a tremendous interchange of

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the top leaders of the military effort. Each one of them became more and more proficient in intelligence and in their respect for intelligence. So pretty soon, you're sitting down there with a bunch of experts. Everybody knows about as much as you do, and some of them are a hell of a lot smarter. It certainly served to disseminate intelligence; it certainly served to get the commander's ideas over. It challenged intelligence, which is an excellent thing. So you can see, with one of these you're getting a lot of use of intelligence. The commander may make his own decision based on this interplay of thoughts around the room, and quite frequently did.

Now, often, the intelligence portion was followed by an informal operations briefing. Largely it would be General Westmoreland would get up and tell this group, "Now, I'm thinking about this operation. Let me run it by you." He'd been over there so long by that time he was intimately aware of the enemy situation, friendlies. He'd say "Now this 1st Battalion of the 101st is going to do so-and-so, but of course they're going to run into the 7th VC Regiment over here," and there'd be a lot of discussion of that. Sometimes the discussion was quite heated. Sometimes the J-2 would get a bad going-over. Certainly I've seen McChristian get them; I certainly got them and Potts told me that he hated Saturday mornings for years, just as I did, I guess. (Laughter) But it was an excellent device, and in my opinion something like this should be in every major headquarters in a combat operation.

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G: If I have the picture correct, what you are saying is that this was a time when everyone would get the enemy situation fresh in their minds--

D: Absolutely. Absolutely.

G: --and at the same time, review friendly operations to sort of backlog.

D: The first was quite formal. You were not permitted to miss this exercise. I don't care if you were the commander of the Seventh--now, if the commander of the Seventh Air Force had an overriding job to do, he could send his deputy, who would be a major general. But you were expected to be there. The intelligence part was quite formal. It says, "Here is what happened this week. Here is what we make of all of this." Now, the rest of it was quite informal, even including the operations thing. Sometimes they might just sit there and discuss the intelligence without saying anything about it. Other times somebody, General Momyer might say, "You know, we've got an air operation going," or "We're thinking about this," or the navy would say, "We're going to do so-and-so." It was pretty much discouraged to try and enlarge the briefing. Now later on under General Abrams, the J-3, a Major General Carter Townsend, a real close friend of mine, finally prevailed on General Abrams to let him do a little operations briefing. And I told Carter at the time, "You're going to rue the day you ever did that, because one of these days you're just going to get your rear end torn off in there. And it's not much fun." Sure enough, about the third briefing--the details of it are rather humorous, you have to know that General Abrams hated paratroopers.

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G: Really?

D: He was an old horse cavalryman and of course had made his reputation in the tanks. He liked myself and other people who had served with the "hosses," as he called them, so at the bar over in the generals' mess, he would sometimes sidle up to me and once I remember him saying, "You know, any son of a bitch that'd jump out of an airplane is crazy." (Laughter)

Also Abrams was the most pragmatic of men. He had no fancies, much, about anything. So Townsend is briefing along that, "This morning," he says, "General, there'll be a paradrop by a battalion of South Vietnamese paratroopers"--on something. And the briefing had been going along really rather dull, I thought, having already gone through my ordeal. Abrams said, "What did you say?" Townsend says, "The umpty-umpth South Vietnamese airborne battalion is jumping"--in some little old village out in the sticks somewhere. Abrams says, "Goddamn! Who authorized it?" Well, by this time, now, I'll tell you, he's concentrated everybody's mind. There's a lot of looking around the room. Nobody had. "Well," he said, "they didn't just fly out there with the angels' wings. Who transported them?" General Brown was then the air force commander. He said, "Brown, did you let them use the aircraft? They had to jump out of our own." Brown said, "Well, I didn't." He said, "Goddamn it, go find out." So he jumps up and leaves the table. In the meantime, the action officers and the chickens and whatnot are fluttering around trying to find--so Abrams says, "And if they haven't jumped, call it off!" (Laughter) This

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shows the pragmatic nature of the man. He says, "We got two thousand"--and I won't use Abrams' words, which were inclined to be quite colorful--"bleeping helicopters in this outfit and we got to go around kicking these little asses out of airplanes." (Laughter) And when Townsend came back, he said, "They just jumped." Abrams just detonated, went through the roof. So after the thing was over, Townsend was sitting there very crestfallen, and I said, "You know, I can't help but say this: I told you so." (Laughter) Well, I think that's enough on that.

G: That's a good story.

D: I've got a chapter in the book on all of [Vo Nguyen] Giap's major opponents: Westmoreland, which is already written; [Jean] de Lattre [de Tassigny], who was a real character in his own right, the Frenchman; [Henri] Navarre, who of course was the scapegoat of the whole Dien Bien Phu thing, and I'll have one on Abrams. I haven't written the one on Abe yet, but that ought to be a lot of fun there.

G: Abrams' son was a classmate of mine at Fort Sill.

D: He was?

G: Yes. We were going through the career course.

D: Yes, he's a fine--actually, it's too bad. Abrams was head and shoulders above, I think, all the other generals in his time.

G: Was there anything to the frequent comparisons people used to make between he and General [Omar] Bradley?

D: No. The thing that you constantly run into is that people try to equate similarities rather than looking for the differences. A

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trained intelligence officer will look for the differences. El Salvador, for example, has a lot of very attractive similarities with Vietnam, but there's some central differences, too.

No, Abe was one of a kind, like all the rest of these people are. He's been equated to some extent with U.S. Grant. Both smoked cigars; both were relatively small men. Abrams, I would think, was about five feet eight. There wasn't any kind of a uniform you could put on old Abe that looked worth a damn; he was kind of given, sometimes, to pudginess. Abrams drank his share of the whiskey--not as much as Grant, I'm sure. Of course, I have no idea of Grant's drinking habits. But those are surface similarities. I think both also had a penetrating mind, the kind of mind that discards all the superfluous and goes right to the central facts. Other than that, there was no particular similarity.

G: Okay. Can you give us some comments on the role of counterintelligence in your operation? There were always stories about the Viet Cong's intelligence being so superior, because of their penetrations of--

D: Counterintelligence, in my opinion, if I had it to do all over again, I would concentrate almost equally on counterintelligence as with the positive operations. I think we did a very poor job, and I say we, I'm not just referring to the intelligence people who are given the staff responsibility for counterintelligence, because that part of it was probably executed passably well. The great counterintelligence deficiency was in the field of communications security. You simply

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cannot convince the ordinary American officer, including the senior generals, that somebody might be listening. They constantly tried to give orders and information over the telephone by, "You know where we were yesterday," and this sort of thing, by doubletalk, as we'd call it. It just doesn't fool anybody. We proved it to them time and time again by intercepting them with our own intercept devices and then pointing out, by a man who had no idea what they were talking about, where they were. You simply cannot convince them. I took it to General Abrams on several occasions, and he would get upset about it and call all the commanders in and chew them out about it, but he never thought there was going to be any improvement, nor did I, nor was there.

There's a study, which ought to be declassified now, called Purple Dragon. It was made by the CINCPAC people. Now, they not only covered communications security, which was atrocious, but they covered all sorts of other things that were dead giveaway indications of American operations. Like, strange as it seems, when the soldiers sent their laundry in an offbeat way, not in the regular thing, it showed that they were going on an operation. The B-52 strikes were telegraphed ahead for weeks due to the international air space regulations. Finally they were able to get that under control, not totally, even in the final days, but at least we did some good.

G: What about that Russian trawler that was supposed to be laying off the base at Guam?

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D: They're always there. And we do the same thing. They're just intercepting signals, not only voice and CW and that sort of thing, but electronic signals of one kind and another: air defense systems, air guidance systems, sometimes they're out there working on navigation conditions, just the basket work that goes on all the time in intelligence.

Now, you hear a lot about penetration. No doubt there were communist spies, that's to be expected in any kind of a civil war. Our own history of the Civil War is replete with particularly southern spies that were able to penetrate into the high councils of the Union army. My feeling is that that probably didn't account for very much, not nearly as much, I would think, as the violations of comsec [communications security] did. One of the Purple Dragon things--I remember it because it was such a gross violation--was that when the marines were going to make an amphibious landing along the coast of South Vietnam, twenty-four hours earlier the hospital ship showed up offshore. I always thought, frankly, that the marines did that intentionally because what they wanted to do was really practice landing. They didn't want to run into anything, but they wanted to keep up their amphibious proficiency. Now that's a low blow, maybe, but--

G: No, I have a friend who was securing the beach. He was an adviser to an ARVN APC battalion, and they were just out of sight, over the sand dunes.

D: Sure. It makes some sense. You don't want to ruin the exercise by running into the enemy, you know. It ruins your whole day. (Laughter)

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Well, where shall we go from here?

G: Would you talk about technological intelligence and the advances that were made?

D: Well, it's like so many other things. You read all about this and whatnot, but in the final analysis it really did not, with one exception--and I wouldn't call that a vast technological advance--it simply didn't produce the hard, usable intelligence that the units could use or that I could use or that the national government could use. Infra-red, radar, you know, we had planes flying around and they'd take these various things which sometimes were remotely helpful, most of the time, of course, in the triple canopy [jungle], forget it. You can't penetrate that canopy. Aerial photographs, which had been a very excellent source in World War II, and a very usable source in Korea, were virtually useless, except out in Laos in the Ho Chi Minh Trails and to some extent in North Vietnam. The radar, for example, we were able to get some idea of truck traffic at night, coming down the coast of North Vietnam. Could be very helpful. But they were not major breakthroughs; they were collateral, subsidiary, reinforcing. The main source of intelligence was just the same old hard-nosed things that you get in any war: prisoners of war and documents. If you get the right one, they'll tell you anything. Very seldom did we ever have one that would clam up and take the Geneva Convention. They're not trained that way. They're trained like the Japanese were, that you're not going to get captured.

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There was one other very valuable source, and that was airborne direction finding. I think I'd better leave it at that, because we're into a classified subject. Certain aspects of it are still classified and should be. But I'll merely say it was extremely valuable. Other technological devices? Oh, they tried everything. You've heard of the people sniffers.

G: I was hoping you would mention that.

D: In some areas, they apparently worked pretty well, particularly in the flatlands of the Delta. In other areas they were not only useless, they were worse than useless since they could be spoofed, and were. There was another, for example, the silent airplane. Apparently nothing much came out of that.

One of the things that we did, and I think we were probably the first American intelligence unit to do it, was started by General McChristian. He was intrigued by things like this, so he set up a monstrous computer capability, and eventually we began to get some things out of it, what we called pattern activity. There's nothing new about it; the FBI have been doing it for years; the local city police do it. They'll note a certain pattern of robberies or burglaries or rapes, or whatever it may be, in a certain area, which they focus their attention on. And we did the same thing with the VC operations, a raid on a thing here, an assassination here, a kidnapping. It begins to pinpoint the areas where the guerrillas or local forces are acting. And somebody can go out and start thinking about doing something. That's about as far as it got, frankly.

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I expanded the computer capability so that each message that we thought significant--and they poured in, in my days there, PW interrogation reports, documents, my God, you could fill this building--would be put on a tape. So for example, if we wanted to say, "What do we know about such-and-such an area?" or "What do we know about such-and-such a plan?" or "What do we know about such-and-such a person?" allegedly they could punch a few buttons and this came out. It never really worked that way. The difficulty, and I suppose this is endemic to this sort of business, was we could never find a qualified intelligence officer, a man who really knew intelligence, who also knew computers.

G: Who could write you a program?

D: Yes. Now, maybe they did--and I'm sure they did do better after I left, because at that time this thing was really in its infancy. But by and large, they did not produce the great results that you might have expected. I don't believe it was our inability to utilize the textbook; I just don't think it was there in this war.

G: Yes. What about organization? You've touched on this pretty thoroughly, I think perhaps. You said General McChristian left you a very fine organization. Did you find it necessary to make any major changes in the structure?

D: No. No. The only major change I made was to strengthen the estimates capability by bringing in the people I knew who could do the job. An estimator is almost born; he has a sense of what is valid and what is invalid. These men that I replaced had not been trained that way nor

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had they been utilized that way. There was no way they could do it. I didn't have time to start all over; I just had to bring in people I knew could hack it. But that's the only thing, really. Other than that he had--well, one other factor. Joe believed in big units. He had in the cards an organization called an intelligence brigade, which would be commanded by a brigadier general. When I got out there, this was just about to go forward, and I said, "Well, wait a minute. I've got some doubts about this. Intelligence is already gotten to be a tremendous operation; it's beginning to draw some hostile fire. If we come up with an intelligence brigade"--an unheard-of operation; there had been intelligence groups but, really, you were talking about two, three hundred men, commanded by a colonel, due to the sensitive nature of their work. But I said, "If we come out with a brigade, we're just going to get all kind of flak. We just don't need it. Besides, what will it really do that we're not doing now?" Well, you get an intelligence general, and I said, "That's not much of an argument. You know, you're just going to get shot down with that."

So I put it on hold, and once that happens, the idea just withered away. When Joe got to be, some years later--let's see, a year later, let's say--Joe went from J-2 MACV to command of an armored division at Fort Hood. Joe is an armor officer, also. And [he] spent a year there, then went to the Pentagon as ACSI, or assistant chief of staff, intelligence, of the army. At that time, the first thing he did was fired out and wanted to know what the status of the intelligence brigade was. I told him it had long since gone down the tube,

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and there was no hope of resurrection. Because I wasn't going to take it up to Abrams, who was commanding at that time, because I knew Abe would laugh me out of the office.

So other than that, no. I took over a sound operating organization and just tried to improve it, and this was what my predecessor did.

G: I presume you've read General McChristian's Lessons Learned book.

D: Yes.

G: Is that an accurate account?

D: I think so, within his view. You notice most of it is about organization and buildings. For example, he built a CICV, which was a joint processing center, which the Vietnamese came into. This presented a lot of problems, also, which I'm sure we're going to cover in a minute.

G: I ask that because when this business over the numbers came up, I remembered thinking, "Gee, I don't remember that; I must've missed it." But it's not there.

D: No. Well, I think it might be worth a footnote here, that all of this talk, that Wallace implied that Joe had been eased out because of some dispute with Westy over some figures before I got there, was just phony. I knew in March, long before this alleged dispute took place, that I was going to replace Joe McChristian in the latter part of May or early June. Joe got the Distinguished Service Medal, a big high decoration. You know, I've seen guys leave there without that. He got one of the four prime commands an armor officer can get, to

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command an armored division. I would have given my front seat in hell--although I got a good command, the command at Fort Ord, but that's still not an armored division to an armor officer. Then, of course, as soon as Westy got back to the Pentagon as chief of staff of the army, he pulls Joe in as his two. There's just no truth to it.

G: Can we talk about the South Vietnamese intelligence operation, insofar as you saw it? What connection did you have with their intelligence operation?

D: It was a link throughout the whole chain, from the American units operating on the ground in close coordination with the Vietnamese, on up through--for example, the III Vietnamese Corps had an American adviser who worked very closely with them, who in turn worked with our II Field Force people at Bien Hoa. They were only a few hundred yards apart so there was constant coordination there. At our level, we worked fairly closely with the J-2 of the Joint General Staff, a man named Loi [?], to start with, and then later a very fine Vietnamese officer named Thiep [?]. We were always handicapped, however, by security, and this is particularly true in the communications intelligence field. Communications intelligence, as you probably know, or at least can certainly realize, is very sensitive in that once the enemy knows you are exploiting a particular segment of it, he can cut it like that, (snaps fingers), in any number of ways, very simple. So even on the American side, this kind of sensitive intelligence was held to a very few key people. This is one of the things that this Wallace program didn't take into consideration. A lot of the people

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who were saying, "For no reason at all, these guys are telling me I haven't got the right figures"--well, it wasn't any reason at all, we knew better. Now, not always. But often that was part of it.

So it was an incomplete liaison to start with. Now, you've got to go behind that; you've got to go deeper. Probably one of the great deficiencies, in my opinion, military deficiencies, of the Vietnamese war was the lack of unity of command. Once that starts at the top-- and Westmoreland adamantly opposed unity of command at a time when he might have been able to have gotten it. By the time Abrams came along, whom I suspected would have liked to have had it and would have accepted it, it was too late. But once you have no unity of command at the top, then the rest of your operations are likely to be fragmented, particularly intelligence. Intelligence got fragmented all over the place finally. CIA had its own nets; the Green Berets worked for CIA, they didn't work for the army. And I frankly thought that was a pretty good arrangement when they got into all that trouble up there about dumping some guy over in the ocean. I got their product and I never thought it was any good anyway.

G: The CIA product?

D: Oh, yes. You see, there was an unwritten law there which was in effect all the time. That was if you withheld intelligence--let's say on the CIA side, particularly--which resulted in a disaster--well, let's say a couple of hundred guys get killed somewhere--and it's going to come out, you are really in a bad way. So they were extra careful to pass intelligence to us. We were the same way in a

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little--not quite in that bind. But if somebody called, like [Richard] Helms says, "I haven't heard about this," and it comes out we said, "We haven't passed it," boy, it'll reverberate up and down the chain. So I think most of the usable intelligence they generated. But they were working, the South Vietnamese were working, and eventually, of course, Komer and his pacification guys, Phoenix and all of that stuff, that was a whole other thing off on one side. Somebody said at one time that there were fifteen intelligence agencies, all working without any coordination. I don't know whether there were that many or not, but there sure wasn't a hell of a lot of coordination, because there was no mechanism to coordinate.

G: Did South Vietnamese attend the weekly meeting?

D: No. The way we handled that was that after Saturday afternoon either myself or my deputy, who was a full colonel in the air force, would go over with the same briefers, and sit down with Colonel Thiep or Colonel Loi and their briefers. In the meantime, ours had been cleaned up, expunged of sensitive material.

G: What they call NOFORN?

D: Yes. So we would brief, they would brief, and then we'd sit down and talk it over. Both Thiep and Loi spoke very good English. So to that extent there was a liaison, but it was incomplete due to the classification problem.

Now, during the week I might go over, if I had a special project or something intrigued me, and talk to one of these people, particularly Thiep, whose intelligence and experience I valued very highly,

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just to get their ideas about something. They realized they were not getting the full story. We went to some great pains and expense to equip them with a signal intercept capability. [We] figured what they get themselves, that's a different thing, which got to be fairly productive as I recall. We tried to keep in touch that way. But it was incomplete.

G: You mentioned the security problem involved in an operation like that in a civil war. Are there any examples of significant slips, leaks, in that direction?

D: I don't think you could find one in the sense that we paid for it with the lives of the men. I think you'd have to look for it in a different direction, and much harder to detect, and that would be operations that were tipped off, that didn't find anybody there. Now, there were other ways. For example, it got to be SOP to prep an area before you put in a heliborne force. Well, those are pretty bright guys. You come in with some air strikes and maybe some long-range artillery, you better get the hell out of the area unless you want a fight on your hands. Again, I think that you pay for it in lack of effectiveness rather than in blood. But occasionally, no doubt we did lead to intercept ambushes. I can't think of any offhand.

G: Have you heard the story that a certain Vietnamese officer, a prominent man named Pham Ngoc Thao, was a double?

D: I've heard the story but I have no way of knowing.

G: You have no--?

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D: That high stuff was a CIA province. They kept me informed and as a matter of fact on one occasion borrowed some specialized equipment to try to pin this guy within a given block. They knew he was in there somewhere. And I've heard the same story. It wouldn't surprise me. And again, in a civil war you can expect this sort of thing.

G: Right. You mentioned Mr. Komer. What role was pacification playing in your operation? Was this primarily something you were supporting, or that was feeding you?

D: Neither. I'll tell you, just to finish that. Let me just read this, since it expresses it--

G: All right, sir.

D: --much better, and I think shorter. Okay. Well, for example, we won't go into this, but I try to give a little vignette of people like Komer. I said (reading from manuscript), "Vo Nguyen Giap would have respected Komer, for he, like Giap, was no Mr. Nice Guy."

G: The Blowtorch.

D: Yes. "He was abrasive, overbearing, devious, obsequious, conceited, self-centered, touchy about his assimilated rank of ambassador and its four-star prerogatives, and devoted only to his own advancement and his own mission." Now, that shows you. I do, though, say, as Mr. [Walt] Rostow did in his book, The Diffusion of Power, that I think he made the outstanding identifiable contribution of the Vietnamese war.

G: Which was the pacification--?

D: Pacification. It's just luck. If Tet hadn't come along and blown

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those VC to hell, he'd have been out there yet. (Laughter) He wouldn't have been out there, but--all right.

(Reading) "I think as Komer took over the pacification program in Saigon in mid-1967, he saw that he faced one major and immediate problem: the philosophy of organization of his program. It was Komer who had urged President Johnson in early 1967 to put the pacification program under General Westmoreland. The hard-headed Komer realized that in Vietnam only the military had the organization, the talented people, the discipline, the communications, and the logistics base to carry out the program he visualized. While he loudly proclaimed the need for unification of the two wars under General Westmoreland, he determined early to keep them separate, albeit preserving the facade of unity under military control. He set up a separate chain of command from himself down through the commands to the field. He created a separate reporting system and his own intelligence organization. He established separate staffs in MACV and the major subordinate commands. Komer, the veteran of countless bureaucratic battles, took no chance on being preempted by the generals or in being dependent on them for staff support. Komer would later say, quote, 'The only way I ever got pacification off the ground was to have two wars, my war and General Westmoreland's war,' unquote."

"The military, including the MACV staff and the field staffs and commands, reacted to Komer's ploy by simply withdrawing from pacification, letting Komer fight his war with his people, while the military gave their total support to General Westmoreland in fighting his war.

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Thus once again, the principle of unity of command was fractured. The net effect of Komer's action was to deprive himself of a great deal of the high level support he could have gotten from the powerful military staffs of the major commands. In discussing his two-war concept with the author, Komer once said that he'd chosen deliberately to go his separate way because he felt that the military's preoccupation with the shooting war would cause the staffs to minimize their support to his effort. The author doubts the validity of this explanation. The staffs take their cue from the commander. If General Westmoreland, under Komer's urging, wanted the MACV staff to give equal or greater priority to the pacification effort, it would have done so with great effectiveness."

"Westmoreland clearly saw Komer's slide toward the two-war concept but made no move to stop it. His policy was, as previously stated, to let Komer have what he wanted. Westmoreland's interest always lay in the big-unit war; pacification bored him. He welcomed Komer's two-war ploy in that it freed him from anything more than a titular responsibility for pacification and allowed him to concentrate himself and his MACV staff on the shooting war. Perhaps Westmoreland was wrong in not insisting on unification of the big-unit war and pacification. True unity of command should theoretically have furthered both Westmoreland's war and Komer's war, but then again, maybe not. True unification under Westmoreland would probably have drawn Komer's opposition, and that might well have doomed the entire pacification effort."

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And that, I think, is the answer. In other words, what he did is he set up another organization. At the top was supposed to be a board of directors: Komer; his military assistant, who was Major General George Forsythe; the operations chief, the J-3; myself; maybe there was one other, I don't know. This was the board of directors that was sort of supposed to oversee this. This met once, in a totally bootless meeting, and never again. And the truth of the matter was they went their way, we went ours. Now, the difficulty was that the only people, by and large, he could get to staff his pacification intelligence effort were young, inexperienced, largely untrained people. So he sent them all out in the provinces and they were largely out there on their own, and the whole thing just withered on the vine. Komer himself later said that Phoenix, of which this thing was a part, really just never worked. And I don't think there's any question about it.

G: If Phoenix never worked, who were all the dead bodies?

D: Well, that's a good question. As a matter of fact, it depends on who you really want to consult. Unfortunately they got into the body count syndrome. The dead bodies might well be VC; if they were, they were quite likely to be junior-level VC, or even more, quite likely to have been people who had been impressed against their will into--the VC had all sorts of organizations, as any communist apparatus does. Those would account for some of it. Corruption was rife in the program. Some of the South Vietnamese officials made fortunes out of picking wealthy landowners up who had nothing to do with the VC and

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then squeezing them. Some of it used the program to settle personal, family, or political differences.

The trouble with Phoenix, in Komer's own words, was not its barbarity, because on investigation most of the charges of assassinations and kidnappings and murders and whatnot proved to be largely groundless, but its ineffectiveness. It never really penetrated the VC underground, the VC infrastructure. Such minor things that--not minor, either. But for example, they'd arrest them, throw them in jail, but there wasn't enough space in the jails to keep them. So they had, sort of like our criminal justice system, it was a rotating thing. You know, a guy sort of rotated in and a week later rotated out the foot of the jail, because they just didn't [have space for them]. Now later, Komer built a huge--I keep saying containment, but that's not it--in effect, a huge jail on one of the islands, or in some remote area down in the south. But it never really got off the ground.

G: Did you know William Colby?

D: Yes. Yes, very well.

G: Of course, he's defended the Phoenix program rather strenuously.

D: Yes, and of course he's not an unbiased observer of it either. He had that part of the program to start with, and then when he took Komer's place as the deputy for pacification, he maintained responsibility for it. It's like so many other things in this war; I think it's a question of judgment. For example, they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This war taught me that achievement and accomplishment and

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effectiveness are largely in the eye of the beholder. If you wanted to start from one level, you could say, yes, we made a lot of gains; if you really wanted to look at it a different way, you'd say, no, it was worthless. It was a difficult war to measure, in spite of all the ludicrous--now we know [they were] ludicrous--devices which attempted to measure it.

G: Well, that brings us to a relevant question, I think. In the fall of 1967, General Westmoreland and Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker went back to the United States and participated in what one writer has called the progress offensive, reassuring the people who counted in Congress and the American public that we were, indeed, getting somewhere. How did you feel about that?

D: Well, we felt that we were sincerely making progress. But it wasn't as apparent then, and it never is, as it is now. We really were; we had the war won. I've got a little bit on that, too, if I could just read this off.

G: All right, sir, go right ahead.

D: This is carefully thought-out stuff.

G: This is from your forthcoming book on Giap?

D: Yes.

G: Okay.

D: I'm speaking of what drove the communists to the Tet offensive.

G: Fine.

D: (Reading) "Many considerations drove the communists to this epochal decision. First and probably most immediate, in early 1967 their

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situation and prospects in South Vietnam had deteriorated dangerously. The cause of this decline was Westmoreland's raids into the base areas, particularly Cedar Falls and Junction City. Both Giap and [Nguyen Chi] Thanh saw the two big American operations as catastrophic blows to his own strategy." We have on record their remarks. "Giap, who based his concepts for the war at this time upon guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam, had seen the guerrillas seriously weakened by the American assaults into the base areas. For Thanh"--he was the big-unit war man--"the American operations had driven his main force units away from the populated areas and out to the borders of South Vietnam, where United States mobility and firepower could be used with maximum effectiveness. Just south of the DMZ in northern South Vietnam, North Vietnamese efforts to gain the initiative had failed, while further south, Thanh had completely lost the big I," that is, the big initiative.

"Not only had the potential of the VC guerrillas been badly damaged and the main force units mauled whenever they came across the borders, but VC/NVA casualties were mounting rapidly. During 1966, communist battle deaths had totalled about 5,000 men a month, but during the first three months of 1967, communist KIAs soared to nearly 8,000. If permanent losses resulting from wounds and disease are added to the KIA figure, generally accepted as a ratio of .35 to 1, the total VC/NVA losses must have totalled somewhere around 10-11,000 men a month. Since the enemy was infiltrating 7,500 to 8,500 men per month from North Vietnam, and recruiting in South Vietnam about 3,500

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men per month"--and incidentally, I've got some things I've seen just the other day that show these figures are high--"the communists were being dragged perilously close to the crossover point. This was the magical figure which signified that the United States and its allies were putting out of action more VC and NVA soldiers than the communists could bring into the country and recruit therein. While a caveat must always be attached to all of these strength and casualty figures, nevertheless they do provide general indicators, and the indication was that the enemy, to use the soldier's term, was hurting."

So in my opinion, around the middle of 1967, we'd had him perilously close. I don't think the crossover point really had very much significance. In a war of attrition, the significant thing is what is the enemy willing to take before he changes. We don't know what that was.

And I go ahead (reading): "With Giap's historical disregard for his own casualties, he might have accepted these losses if some strategic or political advantage accrued."

"The Political Situation"--and I think I'll brief it here. In the first and middle part of 1967, the Viet Cong had lost control over five hundred thousand to a million people. The population loss damaged the tax and food base of the Viet Cong and made recruiting more difficult, while the GVN gained these people for consequent political and economic advantage. The nation building was going forward, they were having elections. . . .

G: So there was real progress in 1967?

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D: Yes. Now, what most people don't realize is that Giap saw an even more ominous thing lurking. Giap maintained well into 1969 that eventually the United States would be forced to invade, in force, either southern North Vietnam or Laos or Cambodia. In other words, he simply couldn't understand why we didn't take military advantage of what we had--as a soldier. They knew that a major American operation to any of these three areas was tantamount to losing the war.

G: How close was General Westmoreland to doing something on that order?

D: Well, plans for an invasion to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail were legion. I've worked on three or four separate ones. Even when I was in ARPAC we were working on a plan. When we got out there, we were working on another plan. One was to cut the neck sort of just off Khe Sanh, just off the northern part of South Vietnam. Another was--and it was an intriguing operation--to take an airborne-helicopter force into the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos--this thing just comes up out of the jungle, massively--and to set up bases and whatnot from which to strike and cut the cord. I don't think there's any question--

G: How big a force would that have been?

D: Well, you would have had to have had at least a corps; that's what we planned on, three divisions with all the supporting troops--which we didn't have. Of course, the main thing we didn't have, we didn't have the permission to go into the country. We felt--and I still believe this is right--we war-gamed putting an American corps into northern Laos, that is, to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail right outside of Quang Tri province. The North Vietnamese, in the war game, threw everything

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they had against it. In other words, they would have attacked us at what we would have done the best, against superior firepower. It would have ended the war. That plus a blockade of Sihanoukville. But it was just one of those things.

There were an awful lot of plans. Westmoreland told me as recently as a couple of weeks ago that at this Guam briefing, which he himself describes as a very grim briefing, which the Pentagon Papers and some of the other research material say are even worse, he said, "No, that wasn't a grim briefing; I was just trying to get two hundred thousand more troops so I could go into Laos."

G: Didn't Westmoreland tell President Johnson at some point midway through that year that at current levels the enemy could maintain the war indefinitely?

D: That was the Guam conference. He said, "If the VC keep on and the NVA are allowed to infiltrate, this war could go on indefinitely. Now, if you give me two hundred thousand men. . . ." The briefing seemed to get kind of confused, as the memories grow older now. Westy, in the first place, thought the Guam conference was in May, when as a matter of fact it was in March. The difference in the two dates is significant for other reasons, which I won't bother to go into now, although it bears on the Wallace controversy. His remark that the briefing wasn't grim is contradicted, among other places, by his own book. Yes, he did say that, a very grim thing.

G: Now, in the midst of these indicators that there was progress, and in the midst of what were generally pretty optimistic reports, given to

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the Congress, given to the public, there were a few warning buzzers that in retrospect we can look back on. General [Earle] Wheeler made a speech in Detroit, and he spoke in rather general terms about hard times ahead. More specifically, President Johnson spoke about kamikaze tactics in the near future to the Australian cabinet.

D: Well, I think the timing of both of those remarks is significant. Wheeler's speech, I believe, was in December, and Johnson's remarks were made at the funeral for the Australian president, which was that same month?

G: That's right.

D: Now, let's go back then, and discuss these warning notes, because they're certainly there. We began in J-2 MACV to prophesy in mid-year, let's say June, July, along in there, that the enemy had to do something different. From the very signs--now, I didn't go into the Rolling Thunder, which was beginning to make real progress. According to the British Consul in a recent article--Colvin [?], you probably recognize [him]--[it] looks like we might have had that war won, too, and didn't know it. This is a tremendous year to write about. Nobody understood it. The light at the end of the tunnel was there and nobody could see it. Of course, it's awfully easy to see it in retrospect.

I think the first clue that I recall getting that something big was afoot was when the North Vietnamese called their ambassadors home. They'd done this, to the best of our knowledge, only once before, and that's in 1965, when American troops had begun to enter in serious

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numbers. For the rest of that year, we began to see these indications of something was happening, something big was coming. A captured document would refer to a major offensive or a great uprising, most of which, I must confess, we were inclined to disregard. You get inured to communist propaganda, which is what about 90 per cent of it is, after a while. We began to see other signs. Then, of course, along towards the end of the year, we began to see these signs of a movement of serious enemy forces through North Vietnam down towards the northern part of the country.

G: These are organized units?

D: These are the main bodies, including the famous 308th Division, the Iron Division, which had been one of the victorious divisions at Dien Bien Phu and is in effect a palace guard of North Vietnam. So we saw all of this coming on, and we were picking up documents that said they were going to do this, that, and the other thing. Then we really caught a clinker, as they say, in Giap's speech of September 1967, "Great task" and so forth, in which he--you can't read it in any other way than that the man was advocating guerrilla warfare. So this sort of threw us off stride for a while.

Now, of course, we know what was happening. There still was a great internal debate in the North Vietnamese hierarchy as to whether to launch the Tet offensive. Giap and Truong Chinh, on one side, told them, "Look, they're just going to go down there and get murdered. Besides, the South Vietnamese are not ready for this. You haven't done your political groundwork; they're not going to rise up, and

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you're going to abort the whole thing." On the other hand, you had Le Duan--by this time, Nguyen Chi Thanh had been killed or died or Giap had killed him, or someone, in the jungles--but you had Le Duan and Le Duc Tho and this bunch, saying "Let's go and win the war, let's do it." It's a funny thing about the North Vietnamese hierarchy. In a carefully controlled country, they nevertheless allowed public dissent. Sometimes they used pen names, but it was either Giap, writing under a pen name, but in this case he used his own.

So it certainly didn't sound like you were going for any all-out offensive.

G: Could it have been disinformation he was feeding you?

D: No, no. We thought so at the time and shortly thereafter. But having studied that period, and having studied documents that are now available, no. It was an honest argument. As a matter of fact, Giap's real claim to fame may not be Dien Bien Phu, although that's certainly one of them. It may be that he had sense enough to oppose the Tet offensive and prophesied it would end just exactly as it did, just blowing away the VC.

Now, there's a strange corollary report here. The VC leadership believed that the North Vietnamese wanted their leadership to be blown away.

G: What's your evidence for that? That's an interesting statement.

D: That just came out the other day; I've got it in here somewhere. A South Vietnamese leader recently, bemoaning the state of his country, said, "You know"--and he'd been on the VC side--"I've always suspected

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that what they really wanted was to get rid of the VC leadership and get rid of the Viet Cong military power," which is what happened. Then the North Vietnamese would be superior. If you want to read [Don] Oberdorfer, you want to read [Robert] Shaplen, you begin to discern signs that the North Vietnamese, rightly or wrongly, were getting a little uneasy with their counterparts in the South. They weren't sure that maybe these--you know, southerners and northerners, there's a hell of a lot more difference than there is in our country even. They weren't so damn sure that these people might not reach an agreement down there. Particularly when they're getting punished badly by the American and South Vietnamese forces.

Now, a lot of this is speculation but I've got the reference in here; it just came out the other day, the latest issue of--oh, hell, the one whose editor is a man named Tyrell [?]--American Spectator. The last issue of American Spectator, there's an article on Vietnam in there, and this statement appears. Again, it's sort of this thing of piecing this crossword puzzle together. The reason given in most of the journals is that due to the difference in accent, if you want to convince the South Vietnamese they're being freed by their local people, the VC, you can't send North Vietnamese in there. It's like sending a guy with a Bronx accent down into the redneck peckerwood area of Georgia. The other is that, again, by their action they were able to infiltrate in close around the towns. You know, a North Vietnamese goes down there, and again, it's like some fellow trying

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to infiltrate into Decatur, Georgia with a Boston accent. He'll be lucky if he ever reaches the jail.

But there are probably elements of this. Giap and Truong Chinh constantly kept saying that the war is at two different levels in North Vietnam and South. In North Vietnam, we ought to be expanding the socialist base, in other words, industrialize, expand the economy, nevertheless supporting it. But that the South Vietnamese must liberate themselves. Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh felt just the opposite: that the primary mission that the North Vietnamese had to do was to liberate the South and unify the country. Now, this brought on all sorts of philosophical and political dichotomies. Who was the main enemy? Well, it depends on which of these basic philosophies you take.

G: Right.

D: Is it the South Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese government, or is it the Americans? And incidentally, you'll notice that the American units were carefully avoided in Tet. There's another reason for that, too; they tried that at the battles of Dak To, Loc Ninh, and whatnot, in the fall of 1967, and just got blown away. That's a more pragmatic reason.

G: How much of this was obvious to us in the fall of 1967?

D: Not nearly as much as we're talking here. I don't think anybody had any idea of the splits and philosophical and political and strategic differences in the North Vietnamese leadership. The strange thing is, in writing it now and looking at both sides of it, you see a peculiar

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mirror image. Westmoreland had his problems. Everybody was carping about the strategy of attrition, with all sorts of suggestions, some good, some bad. Nguyen Chi Thanh--I'm talking now of 1965 and 1966--his counterpart in the field, had exactly the same problems. He had Giap trying to tell him how to run the war, and he told Giap one time to go get lost. They both found themselves saddled with allies they'd prefer not to have. I mean, the North Vietnamese didn't think much more of the Viet Cong than we thought of the South Vietnamese at that particular time. And a lot of the other things, it was amazing, the two had more in common than they had in common with their superiors. Although, of course, they had no way of knowing it.

Now, to your question, how much did we know? A lot of it is feel; a lot of it is bits and pieces that create an impression. But we didn't see it with the clarity that I'm laying it out here. Not that we would have done any different.

G: What do you think was behind President Johnson's remark to the Australian cabinet about kamikaze tactics?

D: Well, by December we were openly prophesying throughout the intelligence community that there would be a major attack, a major offensive. The fact that a major offensive was coming along about Tet with certain units--not a single new unit showed up, no Battle of the Bulge, not suddenly some monstrous army comes up out of the mists. Every enemy unit was where it should have been, where we said it [should be]. No new unit showed up. But we were now openly saying there's going to be a major offensive. Now, where he got kamikaze tactics I

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don't know. As a matter of fact, it's a pretty good description of what actually happened. My guess would be--and I've never heard any dissent at that time--our expectation was that he was going to launch a major attack in the two northern provinces, with subsidiary holding attacks throughout the rest of the country. And it made a lot of sense. After all, you had a lot of evidence. The guy's got two or three divisions camped up around Khe Sanh; it was obvious to us he was going to try and take Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh itself is of no use to either side. The Vietnamese just walked around it and had always walked around it.

So with both Wheeler and the President it was a question of, at that stage, not if he is going to do it, it's how is he going to do it and to some subsidiary questions, when is he going to do it. It brings up a couple of interesting questions, though. One thing, and you've touched on it, looking back on it I think the great deficiency of our entire operation--and I'm speaking not only of intelligence, but all our military operations, perhaps even greater, our strategic, in the broadest sense of that, national policy--was we really didn't have any true experts on Vietnam who could tell us about these things. Nobody came forward and said, "You know, this Giap speech isn't what it seems." Nobody, for example, came forward and said, "You know, the Vietnamese attacked once before during Tet, against the Chinese."

G: In the eighteenth century.

D: Yes, you see, now, looking back on it I'd have given up two good

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colonels to have had a professor of Vietnamese history, somebody that really knew the culture and the language and--

G: I wonder why the Vietnamese themselves wouldn't have provided that.

D: I don't know.

G: Did you know Douglas Pike?

D: I know who he is, but I don't think I ever met him.

G: Okay, you didn't know him at the time.

D: No, and I don't know why somebody didn't think to get him in. And you would have thought CIA would have; you know, they're a repository for all this kind of high-level stuff. You might at least make the excuse as far as we were concerned that we were an operational headquarters as opposed to a policy-making headquarters, but that really doesn't carry all that much--

G: It strikes me that this sort of thing was right up CIA's alley, isn't it?

D: Sure. Sure. Should have been.

G: What did they think of your, as you say, prophesying about a general offensive of some sort?

D: Oh, they were all for it. They were all in there. They were getting the same materials we were. CIA got the WIUs, as we called it, the Weekly Intelligence Update; that went out on a wire. We always waited for the commander to approve it at the end of the session, most of which was not formal. If we didn't have too much dissent, we'd just send it in. Or occasionally, he'd say, "I don't think you ought to say that; you're just going to get the guys all upset in the

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Pentagon," or something like this. But that went out flash about noon. So if you wanted to wait around--well, it would have come in Sunday morning into the Washington area. And [there were] other studies; I remember briefing Admiral [U. S. Grant] Sharp, CINCPAC, in December, saying, "There isn't any question about the fact a major offensive is impending." The one thing that we didn't foresee is that he would attempt a countrywide effort beaming on the cities. Even now it appears to be totally illogical.

G: Someone has remarked that the great weakness of an intelligence organization is the inability to predict that the enemy will do something stupid.

D: Well, that's part of it. You've got to understand the intelligence process. There are a lot of catch phrases which I would prefer to disregard, because they don't really tell us what we ought to know. You're sitting in an office, working thirteen hours a day, and it's like in any other enterprise, a lot of your time is taken up briefing congressman so-and-so, or senator so-and-so, or general so-and-so, attending other meetings, doing the normal things that an administrator's got to do. But nevertheless, I tried to devote at least two or three hours to just studying the situation, getting young officers in, older officers. I tried to make three trips a week into the field, talked to division, corps commanders, lesser people and whatnot to get all sorts of opinions, some of which were good, some of them were bad. It's easy to sit down after the time--Pearl Harbor, Battle of the Bulge, the entrance of the Chinese in the Korean War, the initiation

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of the Chinese in the Korean War--incidentally, I was in that, too, as a junior officer.

G: I was going to ask you about that, but I didn't want to get you started--

D: Well, that was a peculiar thing. Well, let me go ahead and finish this. You can sit down later and the signs are so obvious that you say to yourself--and I'm speaking now of an inexperienced analyst--you say, "Jesus, how could they have overlooked it? How could they have not seen--here's a document that these fellows had that tells you everything they were going to do." As you sit there in the actual hot spot, this information is coming at you in a never-ending flood. I mean literally. What you've got to try to do is to separate out the message from the clutter. And it's just damn hard to do, because you're dealing with information, misinformation, and disinformation. There's just no way that you're going to do it. The other thing is there is always a hesitation on the part of any intelligence organization, or individual, to make a rash prophecy. They really won't believe the worst; they won't believe the unusual. They keep saying, "No, he wouldn't do that; you know he wouldn't do a dumb thing like that." I'd go in there and tell General--General Westmoreland in his book says that "if Davidson had went in there and told me that, I'd have probably kicked him out of the office." I don't think I could have sold it to him.

But we knew very firmly--for example, I was supposed to meet my wife, who was coming over to the Philippines--she was staying in

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Honolulu while I was in Saigon--and I sent a good friend of mine at ARPAC, in the intelligence business; I knew he was cleared and was watching all this stuff--and I said, "Tell Jeanie that I can't meet her." I said, "Tell her, as much as you can, why I can't, within the bounds of security."

G: When was this?

D: 15 January? It's in Westmoreland's book.

G: Okay.

D: And I kept the message. The message is in the historical file at Carlisle Barracks.

But there wasn't any question about the fact that we knew something was coming. Now this opens up another very interesting subject, I think. Along with all of these intelligence disasters--let's use this word, although I suppose in a somewhat biased form I don't apply that to the Tet thing--but in all of these intelligence failures and whatnot, there is always an afterglow which is quite interesting. The afterglow is a bunch of people in agencies suddenly come forward and say, "We knew it all the time." I saw it--the most recent time was in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 when I was deputy assistant for intelligence in the secretary of defense's office. Here they come. So I, having been through this experience myself, said, "Look, let's apply the test. Who said it; who did he tell it to; how did he tell it, and what did the guy do that got it?" If somebody can meet all of those in a credible fashion then I'm perfectly willing to say, "That guy

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deserves a medal, and somebody deserves a kick in the tail for not listening to him."

Now, as far as the Tet thing is concerned, there's a story that the CIA people were briefing in effect about what happened, when they got a message, "It's happened." Well, I don't give anybody any credit for that. As a matter of fact, I can't find anybody in CIA that ever heard the briefing either. There was a III Vietnamese Corps intelligence adviser, a full colonel by the name of Kekarian, a hustler.

G: Could you spell that for our transcriber?

D: K-E-K-E-R-I-A-N, I think. An Armenian. But a very bright guy. He told me a couple of years later, he said, "I knew what was going to happen, and I told General Abrams." I said, "You didn't tell me." And he said, "That's right." And I said, "Maybe you told General Abrams and maybe you didn't," but I said, "I know one thing. Abrams was so sensitive to intelligence, he really knew so much about it, he considered it to be the most important aspect of his operation, that if he'd have heard that convincingly, I'd have been up in front of him in five minutes." A lot of times he'd come in from the field with some wild story, and he'd say, "Now, you know, Phil, here's what these guys are saying out there. Now, come on, you know, tell me what the truth is." Most of the time, I'd heard it, too, and I'd say, "No, no." Or "They've got a point out there, General. We just haven't developed it here yet, because we've got a couple of loose ends to tie up," or words to this effect. I don't particularly believe that.

The most creditable is General Weyand, Fred Weyand.

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G: Sir, before you start that--

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G: Go ahead.

D: Well, I think the most creditable was Fred Weyand. Fred used to put on a briefing which I heard a couple of times, in which he would--he was a very clever guy. He wouldn't quite say he had foreseen this thing, but that's the impression he left with the press, who he usually briefed. What Fred really foresaw--of course, he was limited to his own area, to start with.

G: Which was III Corps, I believe.

D: Which was III Corps. Fred had really opposed Westmoreland's strategy of the big-unit war. Fred, from his own conviction, and particularly because he had as his senior pacification adviser a character who got to be very famous in Vietnam, John Paul Vann, had decided that we were fighting the war the wrong way, that we ought to be concentrating on pacification instead of chasing the main force units around in the jungle. So he began to pull his forces back in from the peripheries, back in toward Saigon. We all began to see some signs of an inward movement. This coincided particularly with Fred's natural bent anyway, of wanting to concentrate on the populated areas. So to that extent I don't think he really foresaw it; if he did, he was careful not to tell anybody. This is again the old test: who did he tell? Well, he told General Westmoreland he'd like to pull his forces in, and Westmoreland says, "Well, you go ahead and do it, because we're seeing the same thing."

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Now, what they really were seeing, and again, not many of us appreciated at that time with the clarity with which we now see it, is that Giap had planned the military part of the Tet offensive in three phases. The first phase was to be done with the main force units around the periphery of the country, which would draw the United States troops out to the periphery and open up the populated areas. Now Giap just wasn't very smart here. He'd gotten away with this against Navarre and the French because their lack of strategic mobility meant that once they set an outfit down, out in Laos or someplace, it was going to stay there, for a while at any rate. The Americans, with their vastly superior strategic mobility, could meet him in the peripheries and then reconcentrate in the interior, wouldn't be nothing at all with all their air power.

G: Was this behind the battles at Dak To?

D: Dak To, Loc Ninh--Song Be was first, and then Loc Ninh, and then Dak To was going to be the finale. They had two purposes. One was to attract the United States troops out to the periphery. The second was to give the Vietnamese practice in full-scale assaults against United States and against South Vietnamese units, which they did. And of course they wanted to learn from these, and they paid a bloody price for it. Some of it didn't make very much sense; they destroyed one of the best VC regiments, the 273rd Regiment, at Loc Ninh. But Giap always had a blind spot in that he couldn't appreciate the potentialities and the capabilities of weapons, tactics, and strategies with which he had no personal experience. The French demonstrated this to

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him time and again; they almost captured him one time in a paratroop drop. They got he and Ho Chi Minh; they walked right past them; they were laying under a log. He just didn't know anything about it. One time he goes tramping up along one of the estuaries, and two French destroyers came in and blew his outfit away. He hadn't thought about that. He got a lesson about tanks somewhere else, I've forgotten where that was, and riverboats, that came on the Da River. And it's the same thing in this particular case; he simply didn't understand strategic mobility, that you could fight here today and two hundred miles away tomorrow.

Well, that didn't work. The second phase was going to be what we now call Tet. That's an attack largely by the Viet Cong against the cities, American headquarters. And the third phase was going to be-- and incidentally, Tet was a very complex, complicated thing--that was the military part of it. In addition to that, there were three arms, or three prongs. One of them was what they call troop proselyting. Through a variety of reasons, propaganda, family pressure, and what-not, they were going to try to get the ARVN to defect. Then the last. There's the attack which will shake the ARVN; there's the troop proselyting which will upset them; they'll join the attackers, or the VC, at this time. In which case then the population will rise up.

Now, this had happened once before under totally different circumstances. This, again, would have been the value of a really knowledgeable Vietnamese historian. The North Vietnamese have always placed almost a mystical faith in the August 1945 uprising, without

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realizing that it was a peculiar scheme of events which was never likely to be repeated, and wasn't even close to being repeated. But they think this is a peculiar Vietnamese thing that just works miracles. So what would have happened at the end of phase two, had it succeeded, is that the American units would have been isolated in a hostile sea. As far as I can see, all you could have done is get to the nearest air bases or ports or whatnot to get outlifted. Then the third phase, which was to be the large set-piece battle to end the war, would have taken place, probably at Khe Sanh. If not, then Giap's dispositions and actions at Khe Sanh don't make any sense. Why hold up two or three divisions up there, almost doing nothing, when you're fighting for your life all around the rest of the country? One of those divisions in Hue could've just caused unshirted hell down there. Of course, the whole thing was also part of an even bigger scheme of fight and negotiate. Like all old generals and politicians, they were trying to work what had worked once before for them, or twice before, if you want to believe the August 1945 bit. They were trying to shake the Americans just before the negotiations opened. In which case, you know, they might have gotten what they wanted.

So again, how clear did we see all this? Not clear at all. We sensed, I think, the purpose of the peripheral operations. The phase two, the VC attack on the cities, that was about as obvious as a blow over the head with a hammer, so that didn't take a lot. Khe Sanh confused us for many years. My thought at the time--and was for a long time--I knew Giap had been opposed to the Tet offensive. I

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sensed it. I now know from a very good source that he was, from a man on his staff, whose name I don't remember and I promised not to repeat. He said he violently opposed it. And that man, incidentally, is in the high councils of the North Vietnamese government right now.

G: Was he an agent?

D: Unconsciously. No. He was not an agent, but then there's some rectitude in a "slip of the tongue sinks ships," too.

G: I see.

D: But I always thought that they had given Giap the potential battle of Khe Sanh as a sop for going along with the rest of this. That was his thing; he was going to pull another Dien Bien Phu there, you see. In spite of the fact that--it's like I said a minute ago. There were obvious similarities, but the differences is what he should have paid attention to. Air power, among other things. I think the French fighters could only operate fifteen minutes over the target area over Dien Bien Phu, whereas, my God, they were queuing up like people standing in a mess line around Khe Sanh.

G: Right. Can you give a personal recollection of Tet? From your cat-bird seat, can you remember the initial--?

D: Yes, I think everybody has different stories.

G: Sure.

D: If you wanted to be really technical, Tet was no surprise.

G: Let me interrupt you for a second there, because one of the common criticisms in the press, if I'm paraphrasing it correctly, was that the surprise that was sprung at Tet was a) that they came to the

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cities in such a coordinated fashion and that they were able to do it--and the definite impression in the papers was we were unable to pick up the movement of these troops into their--what's the technical term--lines of departure?

D: Assembly areas.

G: Before the attacks. Okay.

D: Final assembly areas. I think there's some truth in both of them. I say technically. What happened was that on the night of January 30, in MR [Military Region] 5--you don't have a map of Vietnam here, but you probably know the MR 5 region, up in the central part there--the people jumped off that night, one night early. Now, we never have had any explanation for that. As the marines say, "There's always some guy that doesn't get the word," and this fellow didn't. It was very interesting that all the attacks were limited to the MR 5 area. You could almost outline the area. He just didn't get it. My guess is it was postponed a day for some reason. Once he jumped, we knew something was afoot. I would go down every morning about six o'clock, and at six o'clock on the morning of the thirty-first of January, I saw all these attacks. So I immediately took the map--we had little portable maps--I went up to see General Westmoreland; it must have been about seven, and he came in early, too. And he said, "Well, what's happened?" I said, "General, they jumped off last night. It's quiet all over the rest of the country, but here it is." I said, "General, just as sure as you and I are sitting here, this is going to happen tonight and tomorrow morning all over the country." He says,

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"I agree." Just reached over and picked the telephone and said, "Get me a general conference call to all the commanders." Then he took the map and went over to see the--I think he went to see President [Nguyen Van] Thieu and he went to see his opposite number--oh hell, a hell of a fine soldier over there, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs--Cao Van Vien. So to that extent--I don't plead this, normally--but I say to that extent, the main Tet offensive was not any surprise.

So that evening, the word goes around the headquarters. We had some briefings and whatnot. So the word that evening--the generals and everybody else, you could see suddenly that where they sometimes didn't even bother to wear sidearms, they had sidearms and rifles and everything. Because we lived in isolated houses all around town. Why the VC didn't attack some of those houses--they could have captured Westmoreland and Abrams and any of the rest of us with a couple of squads. I lived with a fellow named Don Bolton, who's retired here in San Antonio now as a major general--old infantryman. So I had a machine gun and a pistol, and Don, being an old infantry type, had an M-16 and a grenade launcher.

G: An M-79 grenade launcher?

D: (Laughter) Yes, one of those old M-79s. He and I said, "Well, hell." I said, "If they attack us, there's no question what we're going to do about it, we'll just have to do the best we can, because," I said, "there's no help for us." So I told the orderlies--a bunch of them lived in that house there, useless--I said, "You got the rear of this place." Somebody had long since put up a lot of barbed wire; most of

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them were protected. I said, "You got the rear of this place. Just anything that comes over the wall, shoot it. Because none of us are going to be coming back here, and don't any of you all come up front." I said, "We'll hold the front of the place, you all hold the back. Don't change. If you want to see us for some reason, you come through the house, and you better start hollering when you come in, so that somebody doesn't get shot."

Bolton and I both had a considerable bit of combat experience in World War II. So we heard the firing start, well, it must have been about two or three o'clock in the morning, and went down, turned out all the lights, opened the door and crawled out on the little porch there, a little balustrade around, peeked up over there like a couple of GIs, you know. We couldn't see very much. The gate was kind of hanging on the hinges, looked like somebody'd blown that off. I told him, I said, "Jesus, you know, you would think if they were going to blow the gate down, they'd follow right behind it." We didn't see anything. So we were sitting there, and about the only thing we did see was--I had an old black cat that I'd taken from Hawaii to Vietnam with me.

G: Did you have to safeguard that cat pretty carefully?

B: No. Well, this cat was meaner than a snake. To him all Vietnamese cats were VC. (Laughter) Anyway, he gets out of the house and he runs up to the smoking gate, and about this time a couple of cats come in and there's a big cat fight there. You know, it's one of these funny things in a serious situation. So finally the Vietnamese cats

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leave, and we walk up, and the kitty walks up toward us, looking at us with utter contempt, like, "Well, I've done my share, now what the hell are you guys [doing] hunkered down here behind this thing?" Finally we got to laughing about that, and I said, "Well, apparently they aren't going to attack. Let's go in and maybe we can get some sleep, because, boy, tomorrow's going to be a bitch." So that's what we did. Nothing much happened around there, although the damned thing had started about a block down the street.

The next morning we get up real early. My driver didn't show up. We had Vietnamese drivers. Bolton's driver, a Vietnamese we called Cowboy because he always drove so recklessly, did show up; he's scared. So Don and I--and we lived with an air force brigadier general who was the communications guy; I forget what his name was. I took my orderly, Sergeant Mitchell [?]. He was riding shotgun with Cowboy up in the front seat, and three of us were in the back with our guns pointing out, looking like a bunch of Bonnie and Clyde hoods. If you know Saigon, we made the turn from where we lived--I've forgotten the name--onto Kong Le, that main drag. Wasn't a sign. I told Don, I said, "You remember from the days in Germany when you went into a French or German town, and you didn't see a sign of activity anywhere, it's loaded." He said, "You'd better believe it, buddy." I said to Cowboy, "Just keep this car going. Now, let's don't get reckless and turn it over, that's all we need."

So we go down--there used to be a race track out there where Kong Le split like this, where Joe had actually built one of these big

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intelligence collections agencies. So we get out there, and there's a bunch of sedans drawn up and Sy [Winant] Sidle and Dutch [Waller T.] Kerwin, some of the others were hunkered down behind a house. So I went up there and said, "What's the problem?" They said, "Well, there's a sniper with a machine gun down there, and every time you go past this thing, somebody gets shot at." So I said, "Well, I don't know about the rest of you guys, but I have got to get to work." So there was a trick in the light armor we'd learned in Europe. I told Cowboy, "Get back about, oh, about a block and get the goddammed car going as fast you [can]." Wasn't any traffic, nothing. Nothing moved. And we must have gone past this little alley, which of course we were by it before the guy could even press a trigger. By this time, then, the others had seen the success of this operation, so they were all flitting by. I don't know whether there was any sniper up there or not. There was some shooting up the alley, but that doesn't necessarily prove that there's enemy up there.

They were fighting at the front door of the headquarters, again, desultory shots being fired, and since we had a lot of clerks and others out there, I'm much more--I'm like the Duke of Wellington when he saw a bunch of new recruits, he said, "I don't know if they'll scare the enemy, but they scare the hell out of me." (Laughter) And when I see a clerk or a cook with a rifle, it scares the hell out of me. So we went in the back door and went on about our business that day, which of course was hectic, reports pouring in, and orders going out, and all of this, and considerable shooting, right around--if you

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knew Tan Son Nhut, you remember there was a golf course just off to one side, the Club de Golf de Saigon. They had penetrated in there and dug in, but being very considerate fellows--I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the VC in this particular connection--they dug in in the sand traps. (Laughter)

G: Well, it was easy digging.

D: Yes, sure it was. But they could have torn up the greens, too.

(Laughter) And this is a matter of just a historical subnote, they took over the clubhouse, with all the clubs stored in it, the liquor, soft drinks, and never touched a thing.

G: That's astonishing.

D: It is, for soldiers. You know, you'd have thought they'd at least drunk the whiskey.

G: Great discipline.

D: Yes, they did. No question about it. They were a good army.

My next memory is that night. The new headquarters--we'd only been in it a few months--had a dining room, but it had never been used. There was a little kitchen connected to it. Well, Sergeant Mitchell, my orderly, was a cook in the army, that was his business. So they got him and impressed a couple of other guys that had cooked at one time, and they opened up a little mess. We were all just going to stay in the headquarters, for two or three reasons. First place, now you really had a twenty-four-hour operation. Second place, it was just too goddamned dangerous to get out in the streets. So I slept in

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the office I guess for about eighteen days, going out maybe at midday to get a bath. They didn't have any shower facilities there.

But at any rate, this first night, I remember, we had a very crude meal of whatever was available, and we were eating in this dining room, with the lights turned down low, and I guess the curtains were pulled. But a bullet came right through the window, right over the heads of those eating there, and went into the wall behind. Well, nobody said a word. I mean after all, nobody wanted to be the first to flee the scene. Old General Abrams, whose courage, of course, was legendary in the army, and perhaps the only man who really could afford to show any common sense in this thing, said, "I don't know what the rest of you guys are going to do, but I think I'm going to find another place to finish my dinner." So then he picks his knife and fork up and his coffee cup, and walks out the door, followed in single file by everybody else. (Laughter)

G: That's great.

D: But the rest of it is one of these things that sort of runs together, of tremendous hours, sleeping on the couch, for about, oh, I guess two or three weeks that that went on.

G: How long was it before you began to assemble a coherent picture of what the heck was happening?

D: Oh, I would say by the end of the first day. We'd already begun to assimilate that we were into a peculiar operation when we got the first thing out of MR 5. I think by the end of the first day.

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One of the things that always happens in a thing like this, and I saw it happen in World War II, I saw it happen in Korea, and it certainly--all at various levels, but the first thing that happens when you get into a fight like this and into an offensive--there were some elements of surprise connected with it, of course--is the communications breakdown. Now, technically, they may hold up, but you can't expect General [Robert] Cushman up in III MAF [Marine Amphibious Force], or Weyand in II Field Force, to be sending back detailed reports; those guys are out there fighting a war. The division commander, he hasn't got any time to send back to the field force commander what the hell's happening; he's out there with his battalions and brigades and so on up and down the line. So immediately there comes a hiatus of information. What the hell is happening? We went through it; every time they had an offensive we'd go through the same thing.

I finally recommended, and to some extent, did it: we set up what they called in World War II a phantom system. [Field Marshal Bernard] Montgomery first used it, and then Patton used it. You took people with high-powered radios, and you put them with the various units, let's say down to a brigade. They only had one function; they just reported what that brigade did. They had highly complex codes so they were protected. So at least you had some idea what the brigades and the divisions and the field forces were doing and where they were, and they reported key items of intelligence. Of course, these are always

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viewed with a great deal of distrust by the subordinate commanders, because here's somebody down here to sort of spy on you--

G: A spy from headquarters.

D: Yes, and all that kind of stuff. But it's really about the only way, because it's just as invariable as if you jump out that window, you're going to fall, that the first thing is--and I can remember Abrams in the August offensive of 1968, which they call a mini-Tet and whatnot. We had this one absolutely taped. One of the reasons, as I remember it, is Abe called us, the three--Carter Townsend, and the Chief of Staff, who at that time was Charley Corcoran [?], and myself--in about three in the morning. Old Abe is mad. He says, "What's going on?" Well, I was by this time the old boy on the block, and I'd been a veteran of this "what's going on?" routine before, so I just sat down and started to write the message I knew was going to have to be written. So he said, "How am I supposed to exercise anything up here? I don't know where anybody is. I don't know what they're doing. I know what the enemy's doing; Davidson's been good enough to give me that information." (Laughter) He says to Townsend, "Goddamn it, Carter, I know more about the enemy than I know about our own folks. That's a hell of a way to run a railroad."

And he's mad as hell, you know, screaming and pounding the desk. So these other fellows, they hadn't been around too long; they hadn't been through one of these before, not with Abe, anyway. So he said, "I don't know what you're going to do, but get out of here and get me some information." And I was sitting back there thinking, Jesus, why

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the hell did he call me in here, you know? It's not my fault that our own troops--I mean after all, I'm not running this thing. And Abe made some remark like, "Sure, you know so goddamn much about the enemy, why don't you do something about our own troops?" And I thought, now that's an unfair charge if I ever heard one.

(Laughter)

G: That staff position doesn't exist, does it?

D: Yes, just give me one at a time. He says, "I notice you've been writing." And he says, "What have you been writing?" I told him, and he says, "Well, I guess I should have told you that to start with. That's what we've got to do." I said, "Charley, just sign it right here and I'll get it on the wires. It says to every commander that I want your personal report by 6:00 a.m. every morning and 1800 every evening, without fail. Signed, Abrams." I said, "Just hold it now. Your phone's going to start ringing in an hour, and they're going to curse you, and they're going to call you everything but a white man. You've just got to hold firm. Or do you want to go back in there and get another blast?" "Oh," he said, "No." (Laughter) But that's my recollection.

G: That's great. I've always wondered this: why did the North Vietnamese go into Hue? What was different about Hue?

D: That's a good question. I've asked it several times, and I don't think I've got the answer. The northern two provinces were under a different command; they had a screwed-up command structure from their side. They were directly under Giap, whereas a lot of the rest of

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them, MR 5, for example, and down around Saigon and so on, the Delta, was under COSVN, which was the Central Office, South Vietnam, which was really over in Cambodia. My guess would be, and that's all I could ever make out of it, two factors. First, Hue had an unusual psychological importance to the Vietnamese. It had been the old capital of Annam, the old imperial capital, and both Ho Chi Minh and Giap had been born in what was then French Annam. But it had a peculiar attraction to all Vietnamese. The other thing was that the VC weren't particularly strong there. A little bit further north they were murder, that's the old French Street Without Joy, up around Quang Tri, Quang Tri City. I haven't got any real good answer for that. He reinforced with the South Vietnamese, too. My guess would be that's about the only good troops he had. You know, a lot of times in this business it's not what you want to do, it's what you can do, you know.

G: Yes. General Westmoreland gave a press briefing, I think on February 4, just a couple of days after the onslaught, and a good many reporters have said that he lost credibility right on the spot, because he was standing in the midst of ruins and telling them how great things were, and he just couldn't make it stick. Was that obvious at the time, to you?

D: No. No, because as a matter of fact, Westy was telling the truth, under somewhat unfortunate circumstances. It became apparent quite early, I'd say almost by sundown of the first day, that while we were going to have some trouble--as a matter of fact they were still fighting around the headquarters in Saigon--nevertheless the thing had

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now burst upon us. Now they were playing in our ball game. We knew where they were; we just had to go get them, and we were going to go get them. So when, I think, Westmoreland said that, oh, they'd attacked the Embassy and I guess killed a few guards, the marine guards and whatnot, that by and large by the fourth of February the situation was good. Most of the towns had been cleared; the enemy casualties coming in were monstrous, probably exaggerated--well, there's no use going into the body count business; God knows that's been shot over enough. And none of us ever paid all that much attention to it, anyway. But it's obvious that he's standing in the wreck of the American Embassy there and saying we're winning the war. Now, you get into one of your questions, maybe the last one, and that's the media coverage of the war, which I think is a tremendously big and important subject, but only in connection with an even wider subject. And maybe we can wait till we get to that part of it--

G: All right, sir.

D: --because I think it has tremendous implications, even today maybe-- especially today with this El Salvador thing.

G: All right, let's leave it in its place and finish with a couple of the things I have here on Tet. Now, General Wheeler came over, late in February. Did you brief him on that occasion?

D: Yes, as a matter of fact, we had a very lengthy briefing. I can remember it. He brought with him, as his intelligence adviser, a major general in the Air Force named Grover Brown, whom I'd known very well. He had been J-2 at CINCPAC when I was G-2 at ARPAC; worked

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closely with him, good friend of mine. They saw the situation precisely as we did. Grover Brown at that time was in DIA, not in CINCPAC. We had a long briefing; Wheeler was always a fine man to brief, intelligent, knowledgeable, very affable, gentlemanly. Westy and--it was a sort of a free-for-all, I can remember that part of it. You know, a lot of informal conversation, the troop strengths. The only thing I can remember--it must have been discussed in my presence--I remember we had a meeting about eight or nine o'clock one night with Bill DePuy, who came out with Wheeler and I think at that time was special assistant to the chairman for counterinsurgency.

G: He had a certain cachet about him, didn't he?

D: Oh, boy, I'll tell you. I had a great deal of respect for DePuy, but boy, when you've said that, you've just said all the good things you can say about that man. He is a hell of a fine soldier, though. I mean, a real top notch. Probably in many ways the best mind in the army.

G: But you shook your head nevertheless.

D: Well, he was just a harsh, abrasive, ugly little character. But I remember sitting down with I guess Kerwin, who was the chief of staff, DePuy, myself, and a couple [of others]--I'm sure the J-3 and maybe the J-4 were there--and we were going over the troop lists. I have a very definite memory that the way we chose the troops--and since these were U.S. troops, I didn't much participate in it, but I sat there, amazing--because they said, "Well, what's available?" Somebody says, "The Sixth Cavalry is available." Well, I knew something about light armor, and I thought it had a very limited role in this country. They

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said, "Well, if that's available, put it on the list." That's all the thought that went into it.

G: Now, let me clarify this. They're preparing a troop request, is that it?

D: Yes. And from that, somebody's got a list of what's available in the United States, so in effect you just take the laundry list and transfer it from one--now this is an oversimplification--

G: Yes.

D: --but that's about the way it worked. At one point in the proceeding, I made the point that we didn't need these people as far as Tet's concerned, that we had Tet under control, that if they wanted to talk about some kind of an offensive out of country, that was one thing, but just as far as the Tet thing is concerned, we didn't need them.

G: Furthermore, a troop request at this time is going to be a politically sensitive thing to do.

D: Oh, well! We didn't think--unfortunately or fortunately, I don't know--we didn't think in those terms at all. I think the bombshell that that ignited when it got out was as much a surprise to us as probably--more surprising than to anybody. We just didn't think of that, in those terms.

But DePuy reacted rather violently to my statement, saying, "Well, how do you know that?" So I tried to reason with him about the troops that there were left, and this thing, and the whole thing got pretty bitter. But the main point which I maintain is we don't need these in any way to shore up our defenses for the Tet; the worst is

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over. He said, "I don't believe it." Of course, he's arguing, pushing us towards the two hundred thousand, which Wheeler wanted not only to help Vietnam, but he wanted it, as a matter of fact, to build up the strategic reserve.

G: Was that plain?

D: No, not at all.

G: Okay.

D: [Leslie] Gelb's book. . . .

G: The Irony of Vietnam?

D: The irony is the system worked. He says that Westmoreland said to him--or he's reported to say to him--"I was conned." I asked Westy about that the last time I saw him, which would have been about two months ago. Westy wouldn't answer. He did produce a long document that explained his side of it. Westy's view was that "the war has changed drastically. The enemy has suffered a major reverse. If we're going to win the war, now is the time to do it. And with two hundred thousand troops, I can win the war." Now, whether he was going into Laos or Cambodia or what the hell he was going to do, I'm not clear at this stage, because I haven't got that far yet, frankly, in the book. But it was not clear, no, at the time. Except it was clear, I think, to all of us in the headquarters, we didn't need any more troops to take care of Tet.

G: And yet you were putting together a request.

D: Oh sure, sure. But again, this is done at different levels. The staff was just getting together two hundred thousand troops; for what

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they were going to be used I don't think even the Chief knew. You know, [he] said, "Draw up a troop list of so many and so many," so I'd say, "Well, if you're going to have umpty-ump divisions, new divisions, then you've got to reinforce your intelligence agencies by so-and-so and so-and-so." But there wasn't any great foresight to it.

G: I see.

D: At least not the ones I saw.

G: This was during the meeting at which you briefed General Wheeler, right?

D: No, there were a series of meetings. When they first came over there, they came and we had a big briefing with Wheeler and his staff, and Westy and his key staff. Then they sort of broke up, and I think the major decisions were probably made by Wheeler, Westmoreland and Abrams--perhaps Komer, although I don't think so--sitting down and talking together. These were three old friends, three professional colleagues, and Wheeler probably unburdened himself at that time as to what this whole thing was about. He certainly wasn't going to say it out there in front of a lot of more junior staff officers, even though they were all general officers.

G: Did the Ambassador participate in this?

D: My guess would be that he and Westmoreland and probably Abrams went down to the Embassy and saw Ambassador Bunker; that would be generally the way.

G: Okay.

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D: I don't recall him being at the briefing, although sometimes on very important briefings he would be, for example when [Melvin] Laird--when both--well, I'm not sure about [Clark] Clifford. I remember briefing Clifford, because I thought he was absolutely unreachable by any--he'd already formed his opinion and, like McNamara, he didn't want to hear anything. Laird was quite the opposite. Laird, of course, is a buoyant politician type, you know. And Bunker was at the Laird briefing, so he attended some of the more important ones, but not normally, no.

G: Would you say that the picture you gave General Wheeler was upbeat, positive?

D: Oh, yes. Yes. Because I don't think he got out there until somewhere around the latter part of--yes, by this time we could see that we had a problem at Hue, it was a soluble problem, and the rest of the country pretty much gone back to normal. Furthermore, we were now beginning to get in the first intimations that the defeat had perhaps been more than we'd anticipated. Komer was the first, I think, in our headquarters, to grasp the fact that this has changed the whole picture in the countryside. The VC have lost a lot of their poop here.

G: Well, where were all those reports coming from to the effect that pacification has been set back two years?

D: Oh, I don't think there's any question about it. I suppose from the American journalists. There wasn't any question that there'd been a temporary setback in pacification; it had been certainly disrupted, you know, like a major earthquake is liable to disrupt a poker game,

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or something like that; it had been disrupted. But very quickly, and I think this is one of the great things about Komer, is they were able to get back into the field with the idea that we can really make progress now. Because the opposition, the local Viet Cong, which had been opposing pacification, had been very severely hurt.

G: Have you seen the report that General Wheeler sent, and then gave personally, to the President after that visit?

D: I don't think so.

G: It's rather gloomy.

D: Well, I don't know this, for a start, but I don't think you can escape the speculation that Wheeler was playing two games. I think he wanted mobilization. I think he wanted to beef up the strategic reserve; he was concerned about the European situation, the Korean situation, and as I saw it, he thought that this was a marvelous opportunity to do it.

G: If you can get the general on the spot to ask for the troops, the president can't turn him down.

D: And it makes sense if you follow it to its conclusion. Westmoreland thought he was asking for an offensive striking force, which Wheeler in turn, in my opinion--and this is purely speculation--was going to turn into something a great deal different. So when Westy says, "I was conned," that might have been an extraordinary burst of candor, but might not have been far off the mark. Although I will say that when I asked Westy that, he would not answer. He just changed the subject to something else. He didn't say yes or no.

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G: And we can't ask General Wheeler.

D: No, no, he's gone to whatever reward awaits him.

G: You have touched on this; I just want to ask you verify it, and that is concerning our picture of the enemy order of battle. How much, if any, did that change as a result of the intelligence we gained during the Tet battles?

D: Well, as far as the existence of the units, not at all. We knew that this 9th VC Division, the 7th VC Division, all of the NVA divisions were there; we knew where they were, who their commanders were, et cetera, et cetera. The strength, of course, shifted, which is an element of the order of battle. We took the casualty reports coming in, sifted them through, figured within from PW reports, all the things, and began to figure that a lot of these units had just plain been blown away. One of the factors that complicates the Tet offensive and the casualty figures is two things. First place, when you start fighting in big cities, civilians are going to get killed. And a Vietnamese civilian in black pajamas doesn't look much different than a guerrilla in black pajamas, particularly to a guy who's making a hasty count, if any.

The other thing is that some of these outfits, like the 7th and the 9th VC Divisions, had to make long marches to get where they were; they stayed out in the hinterlands around the border, around Tay Ninh, Black Widow Mountain, out in that area, and to do this, they impressed a lot of people as porters. You could pretty much figure that at least, for a ten thousand-man division, you probably had twenty

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thousand porters. They weren't all working at the same time, but they were working like ants back and forth up the trails. When the fighting, the artillery fire, the fighter-bombers, and the B-52s, when they start coming in, they can't separate out a poor impressed civilian from a Viet Cong general. They're both going to get killed. So this count, we tried to take as much of that out, but there was no way, so that the casualty figures appeared to be enormous, forty-five thousand people. Well, as somebody questioned, "If you've got forty-five thousand dead, gosh, you must have at least that many wounded and missing in action, and yet you say there's only eighty-four thousand that participated, you know, where'd you get them all?"

G: They're all dead.

D: Yes.

G: They're all out of action.

D: In the first place, their casualties were terrific. And the second thing is, we said, "There's no question about it; there's a lot of civilians in there. It's unfortunate, but that's the way the war gets fought. We didn't choose to attack the cities, they did." Plus, nobody--at least, I've never attempted to defend body count. Strange thing: the only man who ever convincingly defended it was Giap. In 1969, Oriana Fallaci, the famous Italian biographer, said, "The Americans say that they've killed a half million of your men." To Giap. And he said, "That's quite right." And she said, "Quite right?" And he said, "Exactly." As a matter of fact, at that time, we were only carrying four hundred and fifty thousand. Now with this rather

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offhand--a lot of times a man will say something like that when he is really thinking about what he's going to say next, but it's a rather-- but to get into the body count thing, my God, that's--

G: But you think the order of magnitude was not--?

D: What we were interested in, what Westmoreland was interested in, is we'd destroyed the combat effectiveness of those units. They were going to have to go back, regroup, retrain, and it's no secret that infiltration immediately began to rise; they had to replace these losses. They couldn't replace them in the countryside. The eventual thing, of course, is that it hurt the guerrillas. Some had participated in the operation and been killed; others, by their peculiar form of military service, they'd promoted people, as they called it. For example, a good guerrilla would then be promoted up to a local force, which is sort of like a county, and then if he did well there, he'd go up to the regional forces, which is sort of like a state or province, and then eventually into the main forces. Well, if the main forces had taken a hell of a beating, it just sucks the whole system up, so that eventually the guerrillas down here lost their capability. These are the people who opposed pacification. This was the point that Komer saw. Now's the time to really expand. And again, we made monstrous gains at that time. None of this is as clear then as it is now, of course.

G: No, especially in the newspapers.

D: No, that's right.

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G: I want to ask you one question about General Abrams, which occurred to me because of something that you said. It's on record, I believe, in the summer of 1968. President Johnson asked General Abrams what the advisability would be, what the effect would be, if the bombing were terminated altogether in the North. General Abrams gave a fairly negative reply, saying "I don't think it's a good idea; I think we'll pay for it." Then in November, he called him to Washington and essentially asked him the same question. And General Abrams said, "Well, we can live with it." Do you have any insight into that?

D: Not at all. Not at all.

G: Okay.

D: I just don't even have any memory of it, let alone any insight into it. I would have thought that the conventional answer, which wouldn't necessarily imprison Abrams, the conventional answer would have been the first one. Because you know, if they're up there fighting off the Rolling Thunder, and it was not only doing a hell of a lot of damage to them, but it was probably keeping over five hundred thousand people busy repairing roads and bridges, and all of this sort of thing, plus wrecking the agricultural system, which is bound to have some psychological repercussions, but as a commander I would think anything that keeps those guys busy up there, they're just going to be less busy down here. Sort of a broad generalization. No, I have no memory at all of any of that.

G: A related question that occurs to me because of your position at the time was there are two schools of thought about the effectiveness of

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the bombing after March 31. One of them is--I think fairly represents Admiral Sharp--saying the conventional answer, I suppose: it's not nearly as effective as it used to be. Another answer, which I think originated with Mr. Rostow, was that it was even more effective because it was more concentrated. Have you got any comment on either of those?

D: No. You see, here again, we get into the lack of unity of command. Eventually there got to be five wars being fought, none of them really commanded centrally by anybody, which I suppose is a knock against the President more than anybody else. You had Westy's war, which is the war in South Vietnam; you had Oley Sharp's war, which is the Rolling Thunder, the bombing of the North; you had Komer's war, which is pacification; you had Abrams' war, which is building up the RVNAF, and included in that, although it wasn't Abrams' war so much as the Ambassador's, is trying to get an effective South Vietnamese government, and then you had the negotiations war being carried on by the State Department. None of these were meshed in any sort of a leadership role, and as a matter of fact some of it was ludicrous. In the peace negotiations of Marigold, some of those others, the North Vietnamese showed some interest, and just as they're really getting interested, here comes a big bombing attack on Hanoi, which had never been hit before. They said, "Jesus, the guys are extending us a carrot with one hand and then whopping us over the head with a stick. And we're not going to do it." This went on for two or three times. Just no coordination at the national level.

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So to get back to this. Other than the effects in South Vietnam, we really didn't pay too much attention to the bombing in North Vietnam; it was Oley's war. Now, when it got out into the Panhandle, we got a lot more interested in it, because that's directly affecting us, and along with the Seventh Air Force, we used to pick the targets out there. But it was a fragmented war all through.

G: Do you want to talk about the media now?

D: Well, how far are we from--do you think--?

G: We're getting to the bottom of the list.

D: Okay. Well, let me see--

(Interruption)

G: All right, just by way of getting into it, can you tell us what your responsibilities were with regard to the press?

D: Oh, there was a mild responsibility for security of classified information, but this really wasn't major. As a matter of fact, there wasn't much of a way you could do anything about it anyway. Technically, theoretically, of course, the major responsibility was to participate in press briefings, and particularly in one-on-one briefings with members of the media. Joe Alsop, for example, was a privileged character around there.

G: Oh, was he?

D: Oh, yes. He was one of the few, you know, that really approved of what we were doing out there. So Joe was a boor and a bore, but a rather charming guy. I had many sessions with him, as a matter of fact. He loved captured documents.

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G: I've heard that.

D: So we, (Laughter) we used to know he was coming. We would pick up fifteen or twenty confidential documents, either documents or PW interrogations, and counsel him about, you know, "We don't give these to anybody else," which we didn't, although it didn't make any much difference, "But you gotta be real careful," and old Joe would squirrel them down in his shirt, you know. He was an old intelligence officer, like Mr. Rostow. Once an intelligence officer, apparently you never get it out. He was--and I remember the [Bernard and Malvin] Kalb brothers; they were out there. Joe Fried [?] would come around and see me. I had more respect for Joe than any of the other correspondents out there.

G: Really?

D: I don't know what his sources were, but, by God, he had some good ones. As a matter of fact, so much so that two or three times we ran investigations. He had information which he shouldn't have had, some of it highly sensitive. One time he came in and told me something, and I told him very frankly, "Joe, you simply can't print that." And he didn't do it. He was a good man. Fairly objective, and really understood the war and the country.

We didn't see too much of the press at our level. Now, Sy Sidle always was with them, you know. He was always one of the fellows that said we got to keep the press briefed or they'll write whatever they think, rather than what we tell them. Of course, when that went down the drain, why, we knew pretty soon that wasn't going to work.

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Abrams had a totally different policy than Westmoreland did.

Abrams knew the press basically was opposed to the war and it would not do any good to talk to them. So Abe more or less just froze.

G: And yet he had a pretty good image with the press.

D: Yes, you see, it's one of these amazing things. If you seek them out or rush to them and whatnot, they have nothing but contempt, but if you have nothing but contempt for them, they get the idea that--well, furthermore, Abe was a much earthier character than Westmoreland. Westmoreland really is an eagle scout. Which he was, with standards of honor and this sort of thing that the ordinary man has difficulty relating to.

G: And loves to puncture, if he can.

D: Yes, yes, no question about it. Abe, you know, one of them would make some statement and he'd say, "Aw, that's a bunch of bleep-bleep," you know. And when he would talk to them, he'd be very honest about it. Now, Westmoreland was honest; the trouble is it just didn't come out that way.

But I don't think there's any question about--the fact is, there's evidence in a recent series of books, articles that--Peter Braestrup's Big Story--

G: Did you know Braestrup?

D: I met him, I didn't know him in Vietnam, although his write-up in the Big Story of the press briefing which John Chaisson, who was the operations officer, and I gave in an effort to bail Westy out of this thing you're talking about, shortly after the Tet offensive started,

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is very accurate, although I must say not very complimentary, but that's probably about what it deserved. No, I met him when I went back a couple of months ago at this press conference. I had a long talk with him then, and I've exchanged some correspondence with him since. He's coming out with another version of the Big Story. And as you know, a man named Robert Elegant has come out with a recent article about how the press--

G: That's in Encounter magazine. Yes.

D: Yes. And I think there's a growing animosity, or a growing awareness, of the power of the press in matters such as these. As I say, I think it's part of a much bigger problem and probably, if you wanted to overgeneralize, you might say the key reason we lost the war.

Now, let me see if I can expand that horrible statement. The key reason we lost the war was the lack of public support. The lack of public support--I'm really oversimplifying this drastically, because it's highly complex--came from several factors in my opinion. First place, I think there's an ideological factor here. The liberals, which includes those in and out of government and in the media, are always uneasy with the attack on a socialist state, viscerally; they may appear not to, but they are. Much more to the point was the fact that President Johnson made no effort to mobilize American public opinion behind the war. As a matter of fact, he sought the opposite; he sought to dampen it down, to quiet it down.

The press and the Congress now began to get into the act, as the war goes on. The casualties going home, which began to get fairly

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heavy in 1967, the cost of the war is being borne home now. The middle class are now beginning to feel involved in this thing rather than the lower classes. All of these things, I think, and if you'll study the polls carefully, you'll find that in about August or September 1967, for the first time, we slipped below the halfway mark on the support of the war. Now, at the same time, the major publications, which had been lukewarm in support of the war, are coming out against it. Congress is now beginning to get into the act, and of course the antiwar demonstrators are increasing in numbers and violence and vehemence and whatnot. And this, this lack of public support, is what cost us the war. We could have won the war; there's no question about it. It could have been won any time after 1967, or 1966. It could have been won before that if we'd have made any kind of an effort. So I think, again, to link the media's role in with this lack of support is the key factor. I think it was a significant contribution to our defeat.

G: A lot of people point to--of course, they're always looking for turning points, or crucial points; this is not necessarily one of them--but a lot of people point to the famous TV broadcast that Walter Cronkite did from Vietnam.

D: I don't think there's any question about that. But Cronkite always had an image much greater than certainly he deserved.

G: Did you know him or have contact with him?

D: No, I never even saw him. He did, according to his own testimony, have dinner with Abrams one time, and he said he didn't understand

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what they were talking about. He said, "They're talking like it's a great land battle." Well, the truth of the matter was, it was a great land battle, with hundreds of thousands of men on either side. Almost all the other opinion-making agencies in the government are subject to some restraint, if nothing else, the constitutional restraint of the executive versus the legislative, except the press, subject only at this stage to a very loosely interpreted First Amendment and its own restraint, self-imposed restraint.

G: Should we have had censorship, do you think?

D: Yes, but I'll immediately--and I don't say this alone--

G: You would have had to supervise it, wouldn't you?

D: That's right, and I thank God I didn't have anything to do--although I think it would have grown so much that they'd have had a separate agency, as they did in Europe.

I say this not alone; Max Taylor says he thinks it would have been one of the same. I don't know how--and this is Westmoreland's counterargument; I've heard both sides. Westmoreland says, "Theoretically it might have been a good idea, but how would you enforce it?" Well, there are several ways, I think. You could say, "You've got to clear your stuff through me, through our censorship organization, as they did in the other wars, and if you go out, and when you leave country, file a story that we think is false, then you're not coming back in." But again, it would have been so easy to file it from Thailand, but again you say, "You know, if you're going to have your by-line"--and that's what most of them are interested in--"then by God

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you're not coming back in here." But oh, man, we had enough troubles as it was, and that would have just been a headache. No question.

It does show you the value of having correspondents on your side. Eventually the correspondents got to be anti-South Vietnamese, which made them pro-North Vietnamese, and eventually just anti-American, sometimes I think without realizing it, sometimes with absolute knowledge of what they were doing. But it shows you how advantageous it could be to have a press supporting the government policy, as we had in World War I and World War II, for example. You didn't have to really censor those men; they only wanted to report good things about the war effort.

I think this is one of the problems coming up in this El Salvador thing. I can see vast similarities between El Salvador and Vietnam. I can see some differences, too, but--and they're bad, I might add. But for example, the similarities: media coverage, lack of presidential leadership. I think Reagan, now--and I'm a great admirer of his--has done a pitiful job in this respect, no job at all, no more than Johnson did. Public apathy, God knows, apathy is a little mild term; I think public dissent. There's a communist-led insurgency. We're already into incremental U.S. reaction, which is another lesson we ought to learn. Theoretically, I suppose, you ought to make up your mind what's this really worth to us, in time--we never figure time as a factor--in time, in money, manpower, and whatnot. Then, theoretically, you should simply say, "All right. If you think it's worth the five hundred thousand men, et cetera, et cetera, then let's

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do it right now." The harder, the quicker the better, because the country won't sustain a long war. And I think the main thing that cost us the support of the country, which I didn't mention a minute ago, was in coordination with all these other things, they began to see that we weren't winning, that we weren't doing anything with the war. There were no discernible signs of victory.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

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