

116-200-2

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 25, 1984
INTERVIEWEE: JOHN MICHAEL DUNN
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: General Dunn's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Could you begin by telling us how you came to Saigon? What led to that?

D: Well, I was asked to go to Saigon by Henry Cabot Lodge who was appointed of course as the ambassador by then-President Kennedy. I had known him in his days as a reserve major general. He was serving over in the Pentagon on the army general staff in a mobilization assignment and I was assigned by the then-chief of staff to aid and assist him in any way possible during his tours. And that's how I came to know him.

G: Do you have any insight as to why Mr. Lodge was appointed to Saigon?

D: In my own view, he took the appointment really as a patriotic service, and of course he was also motivated by a desire to stay in the action. Now the motivation underlying his appointment, I have heard speculation on from many quarters, and certainly the fact that he was a prominent Republican was a factor in that appointment. But he had a great admiration and expressed to me many times a great admiration for President Kennedy and what he was trying to do, and he also had a great feeling for the United States Army, in particular; for the armed services generally. He thought that they were going to become ever more heavily involved in that part of the world, and this was part of his motivation, I'm sure.

Dunn -- I -- 2

G: Did he express to you what policy he thought we ought to follow in the very early days?

D: Well, I lived with Mr. Lodge, you know, for a very considerable period of time, several months during all those crucial decisions, in the same house. So we talked about policy constantly, and his ideas on our policies were constantly evolving, and they changed very markedly over the tenure of his stay there from the time when he began.

G: What view of [Ngo Dinh] Diem did he have when he began his tenure?

D: Well, you have to remember that when we went in to Vietnam it was the time of the immolation of the Buddhists, the self-immolation, and all this furor concerning repression by President Diem. He had been portrayed almost universally, with two or three notable exceptions during a very extensive briefing tour here in Washington, as a very arbitrary, autocratic man who basically had no understanding of the real problem, which was to cope with the insurgency through socio-economic and political means and only secondarily by military means. As I say, that was the expressed opinion, not only in the State Department and the AID, but also in the agency [Central Intelligence Agency] and very largely among the so-called military intellectuals in the Pentagon, and particularly in the international security affairs branch of the DOD [Department of Defense]. So I think he was predisposed to regard Ngo Dinh Diem as a very difficult fellow to deal with and a man who probably was very often on the wrong track.

Now, Ed Lansdale and two or three other people who talked to him before he went over did not share that general belief and felt that he could be worked with and that you could build on the contacts and so forth. He became quite familiar, I think, with Ngo Dinh Diem. He and I

Dunn -- I -- 3

went, for example, to Dalat and spent a weekend with him up there, only about fifteen days before the coup. Spent the whole weekend with the then-President, just the two of us and his wife Emily. And upon his return from that trip, I think he had very greatly altered some of his conceptions of the man, who was clearly a product of his own environment and times but who turned out to be quite right in almost everything he said, at least in my hearing, about where the North Vietnamese were coming from.

And let me say this here--I've never heard anybody say this yet. He [Diem] told me that time--and he spent a lot of time talking to me--and I think the reason he did that is that he operated that way himself. You know, his brother was his closest [adviser], Ngo Dinh Nhu, and he had two other brothers, as you know, in the apparatus. He believed in using the people that were close to him personally when it came to asking advice. He understood, I think quite rightly, that over a period of weeks and months I became Mr. Lodge's closest confidant, if not his closest adviser, and I certainly did offer some advice. I will not deny that. In fact, there were occasions when I offered quite a lot of advice. But he said in essence to me, "There'll be a time when they'll come at us with tanks in division strength when they're ready, and I don't know where the other forces will come from, whether from your country or France or from nowhere; we may have to fight and die alone. But this business that it will forever and a day be a guerrilla war is nonsense. We can handle the guerrillas. What we can't handle is the main force units which are going to be built up and built up and built up until an invasion takes place. The French learned nothing during their time here of the potency of these people. They have the

Dunn -- I -- 4

backing of Russia and China and their resources are almost infinite, and this is tomfoolery."

G: That's very interesting.

D: Yes. And I'll tell you. I got the map out when they finally did come across and the very places that he pointed out to me with a pointer-- that's about where they were.

G: I'll be darned.

D: Yes. So the man was by no means a fool, even militarily. I also went on a couple of very extensive jaunts with him through the country--with the President. [We] viewed a so-called strategic hamlet plan and then townships. He was a very shrewd article. And after all he put the sects down. He did. He's the one that unified the country.

Now, unfortunately, no one in the mission could identify with his peculiar brand of Catholicism, except perhaps myself. I didn't have any trouble with that. I came from a background where church and state were not nearly as readily separable as most Americans see them. And he was a genuinely believing man. He was devout and he was devoted to the church, although like most of us, he saw what he wanted to see. He liked some aspects of Catholicism better than others, as I do, as everybody I know does.

And he had a habit, for example--I used to go quite frequently to mass there in the cathedral in Saigon--of sitting inside the altar rail and being very involved in the ceremony, not unusual for the then-Archbishop Binh to bow in his direction quite a lot. I guess you might say he was a part of the Sacrifice of the Mass rather than an observer, you know. But that was not a particularly sympathetic part of his nature to

Dunn -- I -- 5

Mr. Lodge, nor to any of the others. [William C.] Trueheart at that time--have you ever talked to Bill Trueheart?

G: Yes.

D: All right. He was the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission]. I think he was much more put off by it. The then-Chief of Station [John Richardson] was not terribly turned on by such things. But, in any event, I think Lodge came to believe over a period of time that it was absolutely necessary to limit the American involvement in the actual conduct of both political and social and economic reconstruction and military affairs. And I don't think he began that way. I think he thought, like most of us did, that with a fairly minimal infusion of American know-how and force we could really turn things around. And I'm sure he was one of the very first off that train. And there are a number of cables that I didn't see in this pile you showed me that would indicate this progression in his thought, some of which I am sure alarmed and annoyed the hierarchies in both State and Defense rather a lot. Because he was given to send messages direct to the President without a lot of consultation inside the so-called country team.

G: How would you characterize the state of affairs in the embassy in the country team when you arrived in Saigon?

D: Well, at the time that Mr. Lodge arrived there was a dichotomy of opinion that was fairly deep between the so-called political section, including the provincial reporters, and the agency people. There definitely was a marked schism in their views. And the military to an extent formed a third group, but quite frequently would side with the agency people.

G: So this dispute cut across agency lines?

Dunn -- I -- 6

D: It did cut across institutional lines, but generally speaking the military, as you would expect, was pretty conservative in their viewpoints on what could and should be done and was more devoted to supporting the existing power structure. And the political people in the Department of State were more adventuresome and given to speculation about the necessity specifically for the replacement of the then-President or the leadership personified by him. His brothers, both Nhu and Thuc, were used against him very successfully and with considerable skill by a number of the political reporters and observers.

G: Was there much thought given to separating Diem and Nhu as a solution to this problem?

D: A lot of talk, but [it's] pretty hard to split brothers, particularly brothers given their very special brand of Asian social upbringing.

G: I think Lodge has been quoted as saying at one point, "Diem doesn't want to get rid of Nhu; he wants more Nhus."

D: I think that's exactly right. I think he believed that and I think that I believe it. I believed it then and I still believe it. I think that we all have our weaknesses and that connection, the family dominance, was clearly Ngo Dinh Diem's greatest weakness. He could not see even in his in-laws, Madame Nhu if you will, the same kind of treachery, trickery, Machiavellian behavior that was so apparent to so many other observers, or the debit that he incurred by going with them.

But the embassy was definitely and distinctly an unhappy place, and I don't mean to infer that Mr. Lodge's arrival made it a happier place. I think if anything it got worse instead of better, but for different reasons. He was determined to place his imprint on the

Dunn -- I -- 7

affairs of the embassy. He fully intended to be the President's man in Saigon, and I think he made that apparent almost from the first.

As soon as *that* was realized, that he was not going to be a first among equals--he was going to be a proconsul in essence out in one of the provinces--then it became a very interesting and in some ways difficult arena in which to maneuver. Because the military saw him as a natural ally, having always been such an active reserve officer and so forth. And he was acquainted with the then-commander personally, Paul D. Harkins, and I think that convinced General Harkins that he would have a more ample opportunity to plead his own cause. But his predecessor was regarded by almost everybody in the mission as very conservative, Mr. [Frederick] Nolting. Even the youngest of the foreign service officers of whom there were, incidentally, some very talented, extremely dedicated people. They really had a first-class group--the younger the foreign service officers got, you know, the more junior they got, the better they got.

G: Are you thinking of somebody in particular?

D: Well, I would say any one of them that was in that provincial reporting, Mel Levine [?] or Jim Rosenthal, Tony Lake, John Negroponte, all very talented--Dick Holbrooke, all of whom incidentally have become quite prominent one way or another since then. Very good people, excellent people.

G: What was your job precisely?

D: I didn't have a precise job. I was his special and personal assistant. He had insisted, for reasons that at the time were obscure to me, that I be converted temporarily to civilian status. So I was given a leave of absence, in essence, from the army and took my pay and all the emolu-

Dunn -- I -- 8

ments and so forth from the Agency for International Development. There was a law that permitted that in those times. And as it happens, he was very right. In other words, there was no military officer that could have survived the sort of job he wanted me to do while actually being an active serving officer. Of course, the problem was that I had no intention of abandoning my military career and therefore I was--probably my superiors would say infrequently, but I was on occasion hampered by that fact, that I was not willing to cut my ties with the United States Army simply to get that particular job done.

G: Well, how did Ambassador Lodge use you in that capacity?

D: Well, he used me as an extension of himself, in essence. Anything he didn't want to attend for one reason or another he would send me to as his official representative, regardless of the seniority or the elegance of the participants. And he used to send me out into the countryside quite a lot to give him a different slant, if you will, on things. And he also used me as a sounding board, I think. I read everything he wrote and I sat in on all of his meetings of any importance, as far as I know, to protect him, among other things. You know, a politician's rightly concerned--my experience in the White House confirms for me the importance of this--they've got to have somebody who is their own man around, because institutions do not protect politicians. The reverse is all too frequently also true. But Mr. Lodge was then I think at the height of his powers. He was very experienced, about as experienced [as he could be] in terms of having lived with American institutions since he was almost a child in arms, over many important administrations and over a long, long period of time. And then he had just narrowly been rejected for vice president of the United States, as you know, been a

Dunn -- I -- 9

part of the Republican ticket. He was very close to Mr. Eisenhower over his whole period and a very different kind of ambassador to the United Nations than we have now, for example, and have had since that time. So, he had a vast store of knowledge on American institutions, how the government works, how the Congress works, which is something almost no one else, even in the administration then in Washington, gave great evidence of understanding.

It's fashionable now to remember the Kennedy years as a great success, but until Mr. Johnson succeeded to the presidency it's worth remembering how little ever went through the Congress. So Cabot Lodge decided, and I think quite rightly, to maintain his contacts on the Hill. He was great with visiting congressional delegations, and his contacts throughout the political world of the United States. I got a chance to sit in--it was a great education for me. It was a great couple of years out of my life, although I must say they were trying at times and certainly demanding at times, but he gave me his full confidence and I tried to return that with full loyalty.

G: How was Ambassador Lodge with the press?

D: Good. He was excellent. He converted what was a very hostile press for Mr. Nolting into basically a press very supportive of his personal efforts and his personality in very short order. He made himself accessible to the press and he made me accessible to the press in a kind of a special way.

G: That puts a lot of pressure on you, doesn't it?

D: Oh, I didn't feel it at the time, because, you know, basically the press had their own boat to row and if you understood that--they were close. It was a small press corps then, and they were young and they exercised

Dunn -- I -- 10

incredible power here in Washington. I was struck before we went out and, as I say, we talked to the then-Director of the CIA [John A. McCone] and the Bundy brothers and everybody else in Washington before we went out. And these young men--and they were young men, Dave Halberstam and [Malcolm] Browne and Neil Sheehan--their names were on the lips of all these powers in Washington, the movers and shakers, you see. So if you weren't totally insensitive you'd see those people as among your first contacts in Saigon anyhow, because they were setting the stage here in Washington for what could be done or what was to be done in the sense of continuing to support the efforts in South Vietnam. They were fascinating people, all of them. Carl Barnett and Keyes Beech and that whole crowd were very--[Stanley] Karnow also--very, very useful people to talk to. It's not commonly heard and I never heard anybody say how cooperative they could be on occasion. I mean, it's so different now from Granada, for example.

One of the things Lodge did right away was redo the embassy. I mean, you know, he fixed his own office up, or I fixed his own office up. Then he put me in an office sort of next to him, and then the Deputy Chief of Mission Trueheart was on my right beyond that, and then he kicked everybody else off that floor.

G: Did visitors have to go through you to get to Lodge?

D: Well, no, they didn't have to, but generally they would. The point is that in that office I had, which was a nice little office which was constructed right there, and our secretaries were between us. We shared a pool of secretaries. Halberstam and Sheehan and Rick Smith would come right up there and tell you what was going on in the provinces. They'd

Dunn -- I -- 11

visit you in your office. I mean, there wasn't this distancing yourself from the establishment we see now.

G: Was their story at great variance with what you were getting from [inaudible]?

D: Quite frequently their stories were at variance from some of the reports from the provinces. But on the other hand, when people like Earl Young from Long An, for example, would come in, their stories were frequently at variance, too.

G: Tell me about that Earl Young story. That--

D: The Long An story. Well, he was an interesting fellow, very extraordinary young man in a lot of ways. He went out into the province, lived there. I used to go down and stay with him actually overnight in his digs down there in Tan An; it's the province capital at that time. He really would get out and roam around and I think he had--I forget what it was--a Land Rover. He had some kind of a four-wheel drive vehicle and he definitely had the confidence of the then-province chief. But he was, of course, very idealistic and some of the things that he pushed the hardest might or might not have worked. Unfortunately, in many instances they didn't get an honest try, in my judgment. But he was clearly wrong on security considerations sometimes; in other words he was not a total expert.

And this was the big frailty of everything we did over there. The AID was up to its armpits in security considerations, the agency even more so. So the military, which had a hard time getting its own act together, demonstrably and truly, nonetheless was constantly harassed by what they saw as hectoring on the part of people who should have been their colleagues and who were not as well versed in the techniques of

Dunn -- I -- 12

the really proven, whatever you want to call it, methods of ensuring security of areas. We were being driven in seven or eight directions simultaneously at the embassy. In the first place, no ambassador ought to run a war. I think one of the reasons that we ultimately lost in Vietnam is we never got the right leader--and we had some good ambassadors; that's not the point at all, but Bunker should never have been the proconsul over there. I mean, Lodge established an iron control over the affairs of the United States in that country that persisted right up until the end. And, remember, I was visiting, as a member of the White House team, Vietnam almost up to the last. This picture on the wall here of my getting the National Order from General [Nguyen] Thieu there, standing by General [Alexander] Haig, see.

So, you know, I did not drop all knowledge of or interest in Vietnam at the end of this Lodge thing. And I'll tell you, if he did do a disservice to this country's effort there, that is where I see Mr. Lodge's primary negative: in that he made the ambassador a general, in essence, and a general-in-chief in the old Roman sense where he ran everything. And, unfortunately, he didn't have the staffing to do it. The civilians--with the exception of the young men, the young career people in the State Department--were distinctly inferior in talent to the military people. The military at that time, in 1963, were still putting very good people in Vietnam, excellent people. Unfortunately, as you got higher in the military, they got worse, just like the civilians. I think General Harkins was an unmitigated disaster.

G: What was wrong with General Harkins?

D: He was totally insensitive to all the political considerations and simply gave his blind loyalty to whoever was running things at the time.

Dunn -- I -- 13

He was deathly opposed to the first coup, rightly in my judgment, deathly opposed to the second, wrongly in my judgment. And in both cases, just for the same reason: the guy in charge is the guy in charge. He was not a clever man; he was by no means an intellectual and he gave the civilians the chance to use this stereotype of the blind general officer who simply sees only military considerations.

G: Wasn't he getting any good advice?

D: I'm sure he was. He had a lot of very clever fellows around him. Dick [Richard G.] Stilwell, for example, was over there then, as the three [G-3]. Andy Anderson, who later became the vice chief of the marines, the vice commandant, was there. Jim Gibbons, who was one of the smartest fellows in the United States Army, and incidentally a Harvard graduate, was there as a colonel, and very close to him. But you know he was--you'd have to see his quarters and see the garden parties; everybody's turning out in whites. They're passing hors d'oeuvres in great numbers, very elegantly. And all these generals had their wives over there. It's just like the French all over again. I never saw dress whites in such profusion other than at West Point in my entire military career. And that was wrong for the most simple of reasons. It simply gave the civilians all the ammunition they needed to deal back here with the so-called defense intellectual crowd, which was absolutely convinced of its ability to run things. No question in my mind. They used [Michael] Forrestal and [William] Sullivan and people like him to come out there, just like Lodge used me in the provinces. They had as little faith in the reporting system from the country team as we had in the reporting system from the provinces. So there was an aura of distrust that absolutely dominated the entire effort from top to bottom.

Dunn -- I -- 14

G: Let me ask you about a famous visit. This was when Mr. [Joseph] Mendenhall and General Victor Krulak came out together.

D: Butch [Brute] Krulak, yes.

G: I think when they came back and reported, it prompted President Kennedy to ask, "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?" Did you have a lot to do with--?

D: Yes, I was of course very much around and about at the time of the visit, and you're absolutely right. You see, it was so easy. I wasn't surprised that Mendenhall and Brute Krulak would take back different reports--shouldn't have surprised anybody. Because, in the first place, they frequented different haunts and they talked to people with entirely different orientations. And they did it deliberately and with malice aforethought in my judgment in both instances. They knew exactly what they wanted to hear and they knew where to go to get it. And that was not just an isolated instance. That was so common, not only on the part of visitors, but on the part of people who were stationed there.

G: Well, Taylor and McNamara came soon after that. Did the same thing take place?

D: Well, to a much lesser extent, because of course General Taylor has always rightly prided himself on being more intellectual than most of the intellectuals. So he would never allow himself to appear unsophisticated in any respect, ever. And Mr. McNamara was so businesslike and so absorbed by and absorbed in facts that he was stringing together lots of information. If there was some way that we could have collated the information that Mr. McNamara soaked up like a sponge and spit it out in some kind of a coherent form, it would have been a different ball game.

Dunn -- I -- 15

But there's another example. He's, I read now--and of course I don't see him at all personally nor do I see General Taylor. But I revel in his occasional contributions to the editorial page of the *Washington Post*, and I don't think he's changed a whit. He seems to be still reasonably sharp in his declining years, as we say. But I read now about the agonizing that McNamara underwent early on in Vietnam. There was no evidence of that when I was there. I used to get up and have breakfast with him, because he would stay with Mr. Lodge. And Cabot wouldn't get up and have breakfast with the Pope at five o'clock in the morning, or five-thirty or whatever, but it was some such unreasonable hour when he would take his nourishment and then depart for the field. And being somewhat brash in those years--I like to think I have become somewhat less brash, but people still accuse me occasionally of coming on pretty strong--I used to question him at great length and he took this with some equanimity, I might add, and I never saw any lack of faith in what we were doing there on the part of the then-Secretary of Defense. He seemed quite confident.

G: Are you familiar with the deposition that CBS took from him recently?

D: I'm not. I'm not.

G: He says he came to doubt the efficacy of the military effort as early as 1965.

D: Well, I was told that, and I have been told that. I have heard even earlier dates advanced when he saw the light. I guess by 1965 any thinking man doubted what we were doing. I don't know anybody I respect who thought in 1965 that everything we were doing was just right, was bound to work. I really mean that. I don't say that as a flip comment at all. What we needed of course was wisdom in 1963. It's pretty easy

Dunn -- I -- 16

to look around in 1965 and see that things have gone in directions that we had not intended or anticipated earlier. But in 1963 and 1964 I firmly believe that the war was still there to be won, that it need not ever have become a war if we had done a lot of things differently. Or that if it did, that we could have ended up with this idea which I expressed at the time and which came to cause me considerable sorrow: we could have had a Yugoslavia instead of a Bulgaria, if you will, in North Vietnam, if we had played it right at the time.

So there are a lot of options that never were exercised. We either had too much talent--and a lot of people have said that in my hearing over there, and therefore that there was bound to be acrimony, and sometimes bitter acrimony over what happened. Or we had the talent in the wrong places or we lacked talent. There was something wrong. Lodge went back again, as you know, after the Taylor sojourn which was not widely regarded as a success at the time, and I don't know what history has rewritten it to be now. But I think that was a terrible appointment. I don't know what motivated it, but the last thing in the world we needed then was a career military officer, particularly one who thought he had all the answers, instead of a politician. I mean, if there ever was a need for a politician, it was in 1964, 1965 in Vietnam.

G: Let me ask you about the coup.

D: Which one, the Khanh coup or the--?

G: Well, let's start with the Diem coup.

D: I'm an expert on the Khanh coup, you know that.

G: I want to come to that, I really do. The August 24 telegram that everybody focuses on, what is its real import?

D: Refresh me a little bit. There's so many--

Dunn -- I -- 17

G: This is the August 24 telegram [in which] [Averell] Harriman and [Roger] Hilsman are accused of having conducted an end run around the administration, instructing Lodge that "If you can't separate him from Nhu, I guess there's no hope for it." And of course everybody knew that you couldn't separate him from Nhu, and therefore there was no hope and we had to encourage a coup. Do you recall that telegram?

D: Oh, sure. The fact of the matter, of course, is that by the time that cable was received events were already moving and had a momentum and a life of their own. The generals clearly believed--there's no doubt in my mind nor have I ever conversed with anybody who was close to the action at that time--they believed they had a signal.

G: That they had a signal.

D: And that they would receive full and uncompromising support.

G: Who was our contact with them?

D: We had numerous, clearly numerous contacts. I think that's one of the most fascinating questions that you could raise. You know about [Lucien] Luigi Conein of course, and Rufus Phillips was very much involved; he was in the AID thing. Have you ever heard that name?

G: Oh, sure.

D: [Charles] Bohannon used to do a lot of--

G: Is he around? Do you know where he is?

D: Bohannon? I thought he'd died. Somebody told me he was in the Philippines at one time. It's been many, many years since I saw him. I see Phillips every once in a while in one of the better restaurants around town. I see Conein every--I guess I saw Conein about a year ago. God knows how many other contacts there were.

G: Phillips was close to Big Minh.

Dunn -- I -- 18

D: Yes, he was. I think he was relatively close to Don, Tran Van Don. They were also close to each other. You know they were all the Lansdale Mafia types, so to speak. He had a very elegant house, Phillips did, and there were a lot of meetings that took place there. I myself visited the place on a number of occasions and was regaled by their tales of how ineffectual at that point the present leadership had become and how magnificent it would be to have new and strong leaders and that sort of business. There was a group of cheerleaders, there's no question about that. These weren't people who were simply contacts with another political faction; they were advocates of a political move.

G: Phillips was an advocate?

D: There's no question in my mind that they were both advocates. Now, we're down to--

G: Phillips and Conein.

D: Right. Among other things. And I think [they were] sincere believers. Conein had a long-standing acquaintance with a number of the generals with whom he had associated right after World War II and he had married a Vietnamese-French girl, a very charming, intelligent girl incidentally, who greatly improved his own effectiveness because she could move around and about with facility. Rufus also had a very charming and talented wife who was also a foreigner.

G: She was a Bolivian?

D: Yes, somewhere in Latin America.

G: Do you recall when the--?

D: But anybody who thinks those guys were doing what Lodge told them is either incredibly naive or hopelessly ill-informed, because, one, they had their own agenda and they were not responsive to direction. I think

Dunn -- I -- 19

this is the key to my relationship with Lodge. Lodge believed he had at least one guy in the country that would honestly try to do what he told him to do to the best of his ability, however poor that might be. And believe me there were times in that country when I think he felt I was the only one, you know? Because his writ did not run nearly as large as he would, I think, like you to believe even now, certainly in the early days. And institutional interest was so high in the minds of all these people, the so-called Company in those days, was spoken of--you know, this is before twenty years of bad novels and incredible demonstrations; it was almost treated reverentially by all of those people, I guess, named. And there are a number of army officers who have been in and out of the agency, as you know. And officers from other services. The AID was completely penetrated by the agency. God knows who else. The USIA. There were those who would even look around the embassy and wonder who was who and what was what and so forth and so on. But it would be possible to say that you could respect and/or admire most of those people personally--and I did, very frankly; I think a lot of them were very talented, competent guys--and be appalled by the lack of institutional discipline that existed.

G: Whose fault was this?

D: Well, I certainly wouldn't blame it on poor Cabot, because he couldn't be expected overnight to turn a rag-tag militia into the Praetorian Guard, you know. It's a fault that's endemic and epidemic to this day in our government. I don't think the now-President of the United States has any idea how few people are really paying attention to what he says in some of our departments, when you get past the top level of appointees. And you see, in this instance, the then-Ambassador of course was

Dunn -- I -- 20

viewed, and I think understandably and perhaps even justifiably based on the New Hampshire primary, which we can talk about with some fun later, as a member of another party who had after all won on the ticket that imposed the incumbent. I mean, that does place a--despite all my earlier words about--they are both New Englanders although of very different origin and stripe, and I think did have a mutual understanding of certain fundamentals. God, they were political enemies from way back.

G: What was the first occasion when Lou Conein came into the embassy and said, "They are finally starting to move?" Or is that the way it started?

D: Conein had given so many false starts. I mean, you know, Conein was-- I'm sure you've talked to Lou--and you know he is an interesting fellow. He's basically an airborne soldier, is what he is, not quite as disciplined as most airborne soldiers are, but with all the other characteristics. He's a brawler, really. He's a guy that likes to get out and have a good time in the most basic soldierly way. And he used to do rather a lot of that with a number of the Vietnamese officers, as I've said earlier. And their companionship was of that nature; it wasn't an intellectual communion. These weren't fellows that were sitting down and reading Rousseau and Locke and all these people. They were fellows that had been regaling each other with bawdy tales in houses of pleasure, so to speak. I think he probably had as good a personal rapport with those fellows as an American could have, because they are different. There's no question about it. They are much more subtle and they have their own view of the world and so forth and so on.

But it was impossible for somebody like Lodge, given his make-up, and frankly was impossible for me to take everything Conein said very

Dunn -- I -- 21

seriously. I used to keep saying, "Give me something hard. What specifically was said?" There was always this aura of disenchantment, "They are almost ready to move." "Move where, with what, to what purpose; who's going to run things afterward, how had they divided power?" This is the kind of question he used to get from me, and they used to discuss them. I'm sure I gave them at least as much heartburn as they gave me. But how could you give up--and to this day I don't understand how the people in Washington felt we could give up what we had, which among other things involved the party apparatus, which they never had again, however frail it might be. And a fellow who definitely--because when you look at how long the generals waited to move, even thinking they had a signal, this fellow engendered respect.

I was around him [Dien] and I'll tell you, he was a formidable man. There was no question about it. And the people who came after him, many of whom I got to know fairly well, were none of them formidable men in the truest sense of that term, you see. So I guess it got off and got rolling and then Conein and several other people almost simultaneously said, "We're off." You know, that's the way it was. There wasn't any of those "All right, I've got the starter's gun. Fire it." As an example, let me tell you: my wife and children, who joined me there at Lodge's instance--he was interested in stability in the old-fashioned sense--arrived the day of the coup. So whenever anybody says to me, "How much of a hand did you have in planning this thing?" I say, "Do you think I would have had my wife and my twin sons landing at Tan Son Nhut and coming to the Ambassador's house for lunch as the thing took off? I'm not that callous and coldhearted a man." They were marooned there; I mean we were all marooned there, in Lodge's house, for the

Dunn -- I -- 22

duration of the whatever you want to call it, the military portion of the uprising.

G: The actual shooting.

D: That's right. You know, with a house full of military policemen, sand-bagged windows and all that sort of business. I'll tell you how absurd things were in that town at that time. I was told by not one but two or three newsmen that the word was out that the arrival of my family was the signal for the coup. That was the agreed-upon signal. If you get people that nonsensical, what can you say? But the general aura of intrigue there would have to be seen and experienced to be believed. There was no one who believed anyone else was entirely what he seemed to be.

G: Did you know Pham Ngoc Thao during this time?

D: Yes. I didn't know him well, but of course he was a big name to all of us and I used to get messages quite frequently from him. I'd also get messages--my driver who was a Vietnamese--I had a big red station wagon, a Chevy of my own, and I had this little Vietnamese driver because you couldn't afford to drive yourself; you were bound to do something wrong. He would pass me notes from VC [Viet Cong] right over the front seat. I'd drive up to the front of the embassy and he'd give me this and never say a word.

G: What kind of notes?

D: Well, you know, "There's still hope; there's still a chance, many of us here believe that the United States still represents an alternative." That kind of thing; you know, really high, much higher flown words than I was getting from our own side, I must say.

G: And these were VC, not some third force or--?

Dunn -- I -- 23

D: No, there wasn't. That third force stuff is almost all baloney. Yes, they were VC; there's no question about it. Maybe VC is the wrong word--PLF [Popular Liberation Front]. Whatever, you know, pick your own acronym or set of initials, but they were definitely on the other side. And for a period of time there I used to get communications through a then-major in the Vietnamese army from one of the leaders of the main force units down in the Delta, in My Tho.

G: Who was that?

D: I'd rather not say. This fellow is here now; he's a refugee and he's probably very--he's very sensitive. A matter of fact, I've seen him a couple of times and he absolutely refuses to discuss this whole era. I mean he still lives in terror. You know, there was a lot of opportunity for that if you knew what to do with it. I didn't. I'll be candid with you about it.

G: Did you pass these messages to Lodge?

D: Sometimes.

G: What did he make of them?

D: I think his favorite comment was "Oh, dear." He was not well supported in the classic sense in the embassy, and a lot of that may very well have been not only his fault but my fault. I simply couldn't figure out how to get the institutional thing turned around to where you could use--everybody was using back channels. It was getting to the point where I thought that regular machines must have been standing idle. The military had their channels; the agency had their channels; and even the State Department had their channels.

G: How old were you at this time?

D: Let's see. I must have been thirty-six years old.

Dunn -- I -- 24

G: A lieutenant colonel?

D: I was a lieutenant colonel, right.

G: Would it be wrong for me to say that you were in a very delicate position?

D: Well, how delicate, I never realized at the time. You know, when I left I had general court-martial charges proffered against me.

G: For what?

D: Well, I think the ostensible reason was called a false official statement, but there was clearly a good deal more behind it than that. And by Generals Harkins and Westmoreland, which was kind of a thrill for a lieutenant colonel.

G: They jointly filed?

D: Well, I think one proffered them and the other signed it as the reviewing authority.

G: I didn't know this.

D: Well, I very seldom, as a fellow says, dine out on that story, but I think it just gives you an idea--that confirms your point in a way that I think nothing else would. And I had the pleasure of an investigation headed by the then-Inspector General of the United States Army, a three-star officer, which exonerated me.

G: An Article 32 investigation?

D: Yes, just so and very formal. I was brought to Washington--I was out at Fort Leavenworth at the time, sent out to Leavenworth--and spent I guess at least two weeks here in the most rigorous kind of interrogation and so forth.

G: What were you supposed to have falsified?

Dunn -- I -- 25

D: Oh, it was a fairly minor thing. It was alleged at the time that I went back and told the Ambassador that there was no room for me on a helicopter when there was room for me on the helicopter, because he wanted me to go on a jaunt somewhere, you see. Of course, what I went back and told the Ambassador was, "There was no point in this, in my going along, everybody and his brother is"--it was during the visit of the then-out-of-office and Pepsi Cola executive, Richard Milhous Nixon.

G: 1964?

D: Yes. And, you know, Lodge had asked me to keep an eye on [him], as you could understand his wanting to do that, since they had run on the ticket together. I got down there and what he had told me was, "Get on the helicopter with him. I don't want him ever alone with anybody unless you are there to hear what he is told and what he says." And I guess I couldn't get on that helicopter. I had been with him all morning and through lunch and a couple of hours, and so I just went--you know, I had a lot of things to do in the embassy. I thought he was in good hands. He was with General Westmoreland, after all. I went back to the embassy and put the then-Ambassador in a bit of a pique, you know, fit of pique. You know, he said, "Now, since I told you to go--" And I probably said in a defensive moment, "Listen, I tried to get on the helicopter. There wasn't room. So I think I obeyed your orders right up to the point where I used my good judgment and I came back here to do what I thought would be more useful than run along in an entourage." That's my personal assessment.

G: Was there some objection to Conein being the go-between from the generals to the Ambassador? I have seen a cable which seems to imply that some people found him personally objectionable.

Dunn -- I -- 26

D: Yes, I think there was a lot of people. Unquestionably, there were people [who] found him--I don't think personally objectionable would be a way I would phrase it, but I think institutionally the State Department people felt that he was representing agency interests as opposed to their own, or as opposed to country team interests, as they would. You know, the State Department always cloaks everything they really want, understandably since they are well versed and trained in diplomacy, as in the interest of the whole. In other words, we've seen a number of instances of that here even in this administration, as you know. And I think that was the prime--there were people who found Mr. Conein or Lieutenant Colonel Conein, depending on what he was calling himself at any given moment, a little coarse. You know, you could understand that if you were a graduate of Exeter or Andover and then Harvard; Lou wouldn't be necessarily your chosen role model for your eldest son.
(Laughter)

But I think it was less that, although there was clearly a little of that always, than it was the fact that they felt that he represented certain institutional interests.

G: You observed the actual events of the coup from the inside of the residence?

D: That's right. In this particular coup, I was hampered, not to say hamstrung, by the fact that the Ambassador elected to make his command post his house, which he was--as I say, when it happened and I got the first call of course, we were having lunch. There we were, Emily and Cabot Lodge and my two sons and my wife and myself. And we stayed there, bundled up dependents, as they say, in flak jackets and put them in the bathrooms, and hung out there during the course of that.

Dunn -- I -- 27

G: Were you present when the phone call came through from Diem?

D: I was.

G: Were you privy to what was said?

D: I was. In essence, he explained what was going on and Lodge offered him safe conduct if he would accept it, and his protection. And what Diem wanted was the attack called off. He clearly intimated that he felt that Lodge had the power to do that, and of course Lodge said he did not, and I think rightly so; he did not at that particular juncture have any power to halt the events then in progress.

G: How could he give him safe conduct then?

D: Well, one of the things we discussed was my going to the Presidential Palace and escorting him out.

G: With who? How were you going to get--?

D: Well, bring him right to the embassy. I know goddamn well; I think there's no question in my mind I would have taken a shot at that if given the--

G: The house was under siege.

D: I don't think that would have been the most dangerous thing I've ever done as a soldier.

G: I think there was a regiment under then-Colonel Thieu and some marines.

D: Yes, but I don't think Colonel Thieu was an unreasonable man. As I say, I got to know him quite well when he became the president of his country, and I fully expect that if I had gone down there with Lodge's blessing that he'd have been amenable to it.

G: How were you going to go? Were you going to take Lodge's car?

D: Right. With the flags. Absolutely.

G: Unarmed.

Dunn -- I -- 28

D: Oh, sure. What would be the use of going armed? He used to go out in the country, you know. He and I used to go out in the country alone quite a lot.

G: Were you armed then?

D: Yes, I was armed then, but, you know, that wouldn't have made any difference. He was armed, too. He used to love that. He'd take a .357 magnum and put it in the--

G: Could he shoot?

D: Well, let me put it this way. I think that was one of the few skills in which I bettered the then-Ambassador.

G: Okay. He offered him safe conduct.

D: And his personal protection. I think he would have gone himself, I'll tell you the truth. I have no doubt in my mind that Cabot Lodge would have gone right down there himself if it came to that. I firmly believe, and would swear on my mother's honor, that he never foresaw that they would assassinate him after the fact, which perhaps he should have foreseen. That's another matter. But I fully believe that he was absolutely appalled by the assassination itself.

G: But Diem refused the safe conduct?

D: He did. And I think here there was more than a little of the mandarin in him, as I guess we'd probably all agree now. I think that was there to be seen then. He had an adviser named Father DeJaeger. Have you ever heard that name?

G: No, how do you spell that name?

D: D-e-J-A-E-G-E-R. Who went after the fall of this to Taipei. I kept up with him for a long time, the whole time I was in the White House. He was very close to Ngo Dinh Diem.

Dunn -- I -- 29

G: Do you know where he is now?

D: He's dead, I believe. If he's not, he's still in Taipei, but my recollection is that he passed away. He was a Dutch-German priest who had been in mainland China and who had come and organized, in essence, the Chinese community for Ngo Dinh Diem. He was a very strong-minded and a powerful leader. He was very important to the Catholics out in Hau Nghia, for example. I'm sure you've heard about that line of settlements just out beyond the Bien Hoa highway there and so forth and so on. And he used to be--he adopted me immediately upon arrival. He saw me as a way to get to the American Embassy--it's a mistake not infrequently made to believe that all Irish Catholics are such good servants of the church that they will--but we were useful to each other and I genuinely liked him. I had a deep and abiding affection for him, which, as I say, persisted until I think he either died or went institutionally somewhere or something.

But he told me about a conversation that he had with the then-President just hours before the coup began, in which he had foreseen these events and said in essence, "I think time has run out on us. The sands of time have run out and it only remains for me to do my duty as has been given to me to see my duty."

G: And this is Diem speaking?

D: Right. So I think he fully expected to go down with the ship in the truest legacy of things.

G: Who killed Diem?

D: I'd just be speculating. I've heard the same stories you've heard. I have no intimate knowledge of it. We saw the pictures and everything in

Dunn -- I -- 30

the personnel carrier and all that, but I guess you know who the leading candidates are.

G: Yes, well, I know what--

D: I think one of them is almost certainly the culprit, as the fellow says. Or what do they call it, the "perpetrator" in police language?

G: When Tran Van Don was asked, he said, "Why don't you ask Big Minh?"

D: Of course, Tran Van Don, of all of them I think was the nearest approximation to an Italian general in the old days in Italy, and I mean that was one man with the moves, as they say. He had all these little romances going with the inner circle and a fascinating private life, I must say. And incidentally a very model of a French-schooled officer in a lot of ways, very [inaudible] the worst points of the French army.

G: Well--

D: Big Minh was General Taylor's favorite tennis partner. I was never really able to get much beyond that. Americans tended to like him, much more than Little Minh, for reasons that again were always obscure to me other than the fact that he was big and bluff and hearty and not very Vietnamese, more American than most Vietnamese. Most Vietnamese were not very American, you know, even at the very end.

G: Does this apply to Khanh?

D: Khanh probably was the most. Have you ever talked to Jasper Wilson?

G: No.

D: Do you know that name?

G: I know that name. Do you know where he is?

D: I don't, no. I mean, Jap's--that's a long time ago now, you know. He was a very senior colonel then, but he was practically an aide-de-camp

Dunn -- I -- 31

to General Khanh in his role as then--I think he was corps adviser, what was called corps area adviser.

But that's a coup, if it's of interest to you, we could talk about with some real--because to me it's much more instructive in the way things happened, [in] which the actual sequence of events would read like a mediocre novel that would be rejected by most reputable publishers as simply not conducive to acceptance. Because what happened there was--and I'll try to make this a fairly brief soliloquy--we had a meeting of the highest ranking people in Vietnam where it was agreed by both the agency and the military representatives present, including Colonel Wilson, that there would be no coup, that Khanh was loyal, supportive of the regime, understanding of the potential for difficulty and so forth and so on and so on. All these things [were] examined at great length.

G: About when would this have happened, do you--?

D: God, I'd have to get my notes, but it's all in the record somewhere, because this is the day in which--the coup took place that night, which ought to be easy enough to find.

G: January 31?

D: Yes, somewhere in that area. I repaired after a long, hard day to my quarters, as they say, in this apartment that I occupied with my family just down the street from the Ambassador, whom we had moved out of his earlier residence for reasons of security and so forth. I got a knock on the door late in the evening, after ten o'clock at least, and Wilson was there with the then-adviser to the airborne brigade, whose name escapes me. I can see his face; I'll think of his name maybe.

G: It wasn't Sandy Meloy, was it?

Dunn -- I -- 32

D: No, it wasn't. It was Lamb, I believe his name was; nice fellow, too. They were there alone in a car and what they had come to tell me was that there was going to be an uprising that night. Very imminent. It was imminent. So in the first place the fact that two full colonels in the United States Army would come to me--who was ostensibly a civilian at least, on inactive service with the then-Ambassador from the United States as his personal and special assistant; I was not in any chain of command, at least in theory--with that kind of news. That ought to be of some significance. I thought about it for about a tenth of a second and said, "Let me get my coat," and went down, got in the car, drove down the street to the Ambassador's residence, to which I had access of course; went in and was informed that he had retired, which didn't come as a shock to me, knowing his habits. I told his wife, "I've got to see him." It's a measure of the degree of respect and affection that she had for me that she actually allowed me to disturb him in his repose, because that didn't happen very often.

G: That's my impression.

D: That did not happen very often. And I went upstairs--and certainly I was sensitive to that problem. I went upstairs and sat on his bed and said, "Here's the situation as I see it." And he said, "This couldn't be. You were with me. You were there this afternoon." I said, "Believe me, I have a feeling that urgency is the name of the game. This is where we are, and this is what's going on. This is the fellow who knows. He's as close to Khanh as I am to you. Now, would you do something like this and not tell me?" He said, "No, I would not." I said, "Okay, what do you want me to do?" We had changed DCMs by this time. Trueheart had gone to his reward somewhere and a fellow named

Dunn -- I -- 33

Nes, David Nes, was the then-DCM. I suggested I go get him up and apprise him of the situation as I understood the situation, and then I proposed that I tell Wilson to go back to General Khanh and establish a communications link with the embassy to which I would go, so we could report developments if indeed they occurred, as I felt they would. I said, "I think it's imminent. [For] the first time in our lives we are actually ahead of the curve here. We know something's going to happen that's going to happen." I wasted time by going out to see Nes, who was understandably nonplused by the development and not terribly anxious to take the bull by the horns, for reasons that I think we can both understand. So it was decided I would go to the embassy and open this channel of communication, and in essence you know--

G: Was this because this was regarded as a military development rather than a [inaudible]?

D: No, I don't think so. I think it was just a classic case of nobody really wanting to grab this one. This is the tar baby; you know, you've seen tar babies, and this was the original tar baby, this one. It was clear to me. I have no misapprehensions about how clever I am, but I saw this one. I took it, believe me, with the greatest of reluctance on myself, but I didn't see anybody else around was going to do it. So I went down to the embassy; I had the car and I forget whether Nes--he came much later. He didn't come then; he was going to do something else. And I sent a message to [Richard G.] Weede, who was later a marine corps lieutenant general.

G: Would you spell that for me?

D: I think it was W-E-E-D-E. He later became commander of the Atlantic or the Pacific landing forces. He was then a major general, and Harkins'

Dunn -- I -- 34

chief of staff or deputy, I forget which. I think they were using deputy. And I suggested that he come over to the embassy inasmuch as this is where the message would come first, which he did. Then I opened the channel with Washington with a flash message, telling them that this is the story--and quoting Wilson by name, not being reluctant; let's all be in this together. Sure enough. The phone number I'd given Wilson which was on my desk in my office rang and there he was; he's at the command post and they're launching the coup. They're launching the military operation. They're bringing troops up from Can Tho and My Tho right up the coast highway, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And there's no point in going into all that subject, except that we spent the whole night on that, sending messages, telling Washington what went on. That of course was the genesis of the earlier problem that I told you that I had with the military. That would have infuriated me when I rose to the rank of major general. Nobody in the military would take that kindly. If I were Harkins, I would have been berserk. No question about it. On the other hand, I was operating under explicit instructions from my lawfully constituted superior as I saw it, and I was doing what I frankly thought was in the best interests of the United States Government as well.

At the end of the thing, what Wilson conveys is that Khanh wants to meet with the Ambassador and put things together. So we debate where to do it, what's the best thing. Khanh has the idea, "Why not your place? We'll do it quietly and there'll be no furor, no one will know. We'll just get this thing all done and we can have a formal meeting later." So I said, "All right. We'll meet for breakfast at my place if the Ambassador is agreeable." And I called him and he was agreeable. I

Dunn -- I -- 35

said, "Let's do it quietly and leave your car down the street a couple of--walk up, and that kind of secrecy--the whole business. I raced back. This again tells you--it's kind of a fun story from here on, but it tells you more about what was going on in Saigon than the average person will ever understand. When I got to my apartment, which I have no hesitation telling you was pretty nice--I mean, having taken care of the Ambassador, I then took care of myself and it was a nice apartment. It was long and airy and had balconies and all that sort of business. My servants, of whom I had three--or my wife Frances had three, which was not unusual over there, because they came husband and wife and then the driver and then the driver had a wife, so we actually had four--had already, when I arrived, recruited extra help for the breakfast, and I came direct from the embassy by car and it was about ten, twelve blocks, I'd say.

G: Whose intuition was working there?

D: Well, it was a good deal more than intuition. The grapevine was out, clearly out of Khanh's headquarters already, and his security people had undoubtedly been in the neighborhood, and I'm telling you I had about eight or nine Vietnamese rushing around I'd never seen--white coats and all slicked up--and this is about six-thirty in the morning, which is early even in Vietnam. And provisions appear and the whole business and--you know, my poor wife was absolutely dumbfounded. I said, "You're going to have a great thrill here today. The new President of Vietnam is about to arrive to be your guest for breakfast."

G: Did you ever talk to Colonel Wilson about, what shall we call it, the lack of notice that he was able to provide you with?

Dunn -- I -- 36

D: Indeed. But just let me finish this, because it's fun. It really is a fun thing.

Lodge walks up then--bear in mind, he's a man in his sixties, nice and quiet and everything, trying to blend into the background a little bit. Khanh arrives in a convoy with sirens, you know, police outriders, jeeps, lights flashing, and comes out. The whole apartment district is filled with people in their balconies applauding. And in the grand manner he comes up, goes to my balcony, and takes his bows.

G: Takes his bows.

D: So I like to think I was part of an historic moment there. I provided the setting for the accession to power.

G: I've seen a picture of that, I think.

(Laughter)

D: Don't you think that's funny? Really, and then he sat down there and he did something my wife never forgave him for. He took his pistol off. He used to be kind of flamboyant. You remember him, of course. He took it off and skidded it across her coffee table and the hammer gouged [it]. I said, "Never have that fixed."

(Laughter)

Yes, of course, we used to talk a little bit after that, but you know, there are things you had rather not know. I really mean that sincerely. I think Wilson was a wholly honorable man. I really do, and I think he put his career in grave jeopardy by doing what he did. Why he chose to take that route instead of going to Harkins, I don't know. We could speculate, and I imagine either you or I could come fairly close to the truth but we'd never know for sure.

Dunn -- I -- 37

But in any event I think he really believed earlier that it was--I don't think he was nearly as positive as the consensus of that meeting would have it, because, you know, Harkins didn't want to believe. He hated upsets and he hated confusion and chaos, and almost every soldier does. Did you ever know a soldier who really reveled in chaos? It's not the soldierly way, you know. And he could see quite rightly that we're in for much more of the same. We're just settling down; they were starting to do some of the things that the military thought ought to be done. And here we were turning the whole thing over again. So the meeting was destined unavoidably, because of the predilection for hearing this thing, to be slanted in the direction of "We're all going to go on as we have been." That doesn't excuse our intelligence apparatus for not having picked this up. Because that army was a sieve. Their army. Our army, too, but their army in particular. And somebody other than Jap Wilson ought to have known what was going on, because you can bet your life a lot of people besides Khanh--I mean Nguyen Khanh wasn't the only one that knew there was going to be one either. He had a large number of people standing around him.

G: But, as far as you know, CIA didn't pick this up?

D: If they did, they never told us. The first warning the Ambassador got he got from me and I got from Jap Wilson.

G: Peer DeSilva was chief of station. Brand new, I think.

D: Peer was COS [chief of station] then, yes. A good man, incidentally.

G: He had gotten there in December, and Dave Smith had been acting.

D: Dave was acting, right. For quite a period of time actually.

G: Well, Jocko Richardson was sent home in October.

D: Yes.

Dunn -- I -- 38

G: What was behind that?

D: Oh, I think some of it was personality differences, but I think most of it was simply scapegoating, you know. He was regarded as very close to Nolting and I think that a lot of people for their own purposes, which were not necessarily abominable, took a lot of shots at him. I mean, he was so wed to the old ways and the old people that he simply couldn't make the adjustment and come on board and it was necessary to get new faces, and I think rightly they thought if everybody got off on the same foot, it would be better. There was some real jealousy between, as I said earlier, the station and the State Department proper side of the house.

G: Were there any recriminations because of CIA's lack of warning on the Khanh thing?

D: It's surprising--I think the Ambassador felt the army should have known more. They had advisers at every level. How come Jap's the only guy that's got enough rapport to get the tip? I really think he was more surprised--I guess I was more surprised that the army didn't know more, that the agency didn't--you know, the agency was almost amorphous; they were everywhere and doing everything and they were on all sides of every question. You could go to the agency, and we did later on. They had something called the old hands. Did you ever hear that story that they came out and did a--this was later than that, much later. And I don't know the genesis of it, but some bright young man probably proposed to the then-director that they gather from all over the world people who had had experience in Vietnam and send them out to take a look.

I'm telling you this anecdote for two reasons. The first place, I think it's substantively significant, and secondly, I think again it

Dunn -- I -- 39

illustrates the point of the lack, the total lack, of frankness, cooperation, honesty, you know, all those things that ought to have existed at the highest levels in our mission. These guys came out from all over. I mean there were people that were stationed in Brussels and the United Kingdom and the States, and quite a large number. Now, anybody who had been in Vietnam at all, any length of time, should have known you couldn't dump that many Americans in that country without word getting out of what was going on. And I would have heard of it by that time anyway, because I had developed a very significant number of independent contacts by then for self-preservation, if nothing else. But the people that told me about it came right up out of the station and came right into my office again and said, "You ought to know what's going on behind the Ambassador's back."

G: Now, this visitation was for the purpose of making a fresh assessment.

D: That's correct. But it was not discussed with the proconsul.

G: With the Ambassador.

D: That's right. Exactly.

G: Do you remember who any of these people were?

D: No, I used to keep notes on it, but I think I destroyed them all years ago.

G: George Carver wouldn't have been--

D: Carver was probably somewhere involved, based on his--you know, I don't know how they could have got around him. But again, think of the fact that a couple of guys come up from Saigon station and tell me this thing that is presumably going to be sprung on us later--they're going to say--because after all, what they are calling into question is not just their own reporting channels, but the country team reporting channels,

Dunn -- I -- 40

you see. I think at that time I had been designated by Lodge as the executive secretary of the country team, which gave me a little bit more patina, if you will, of the thing.

G: Did these people ask to see the Ambassador?

D: No, they just talked to me. But then I had several of them come out to the house. I said, you know, "Get these guys." And they were nothing loath; they came out for drinks and sat in the balcony and we'd chat about what they'd found and so forth.

Now, here's the fun part of this one--there's always a fun part in these stories on Vietnam, because it was a fun place to be, aside from the human tragedy and the monumental mistakes and so forth. The very next day, or within let's say thirty-six hours, we are getting visited by General Taylor, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I think it was McCone [who] had the agency at that time. And they came out. You know, we used to get the country team out there. It was the team of *this* country--we'd have had the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and this was not a minor thing. And Lodge opened the meeting, as was his wont. There's one thing in particular he had that he brought to this job that was valuable: his presence. I mean, he took a back seat to no one. He opened the meeting and he said, "Now, before we"--you know, he gave them the usual whatever. "Before we begin I want to tell you, we've had a group out here that I think the agency calls the old hands." Peeling off like you know. And he says, "Let me tell you some of the things they've found." (Laughter) So he completely stripped this bombshell that they had waiting for the poor Ambassador and his troops, from the--

G: Did you feed the information to Lodge?

Dunn -- I -- 41

D: Yes, sure, I wrote the whole thing up and gave it to him. I said, "Here's something you can have a little fun with." He said, "I love it," which tells you a little bit about his boldness and his personal strength, too, because I tell you he was not at all loath to sit down and take on Bill Bundy and Dean Rusk simultaneously, aided and abetted by McNamara as they might have been. Of course, they all at this time went different ways. Taylor was berserk, and he was absolutely livid-- he said, "I thought we had a firm agreement at home that we'd all be. . . ." He wasn't mad because they were undermining poor Cabot. He was mad because they were undermining him. He was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and here these people are out doing this thing.

G: Well, what did the old hands discover?

D: Oh, it was more of the same. I think the sort of thing that any of us could have said by intuition; that there's reports coming in that do not fully reflect the strength of either the main force or the local units; progress is being reported that is at best ephemeral, the people still have great doubts about the staying power of the Americans, and that's what the enemy's harping on all the time. "Sure, you'll have a good time this year and maybe next year, but we'll be around ten years from now."

G: Is the Earl Young case in Long An in any way illustrative of this kind of thing?

D: It is to some extent. Sure, you know, there's just so many ways you can sing the same song. This was "Amazing Grace" to a different beat, that's all.

G: You were sent down to Long An to check out. . . or whatever.

Dunn -- I -- 42

D: A number of times. For a couple of reasons. First of all, I'm trying to think of the name of the province chief who was so remarkable down there with whom I became--I have his name on a presentation Viet Cong gun in my living room. It just escapes me now. That was one of the reasons. He was sympathetic to the thing. And, secondly, he was nearby, so you can always get there--Lodge never liked to have me gone too long. I could go down and go back, and I could drive, so I wasn't dependent upon the military for transportation, which after all pretty well blows that game. I mean, as soon as you put in for the use of a helicopter to go somewhere--

G: The notice goes out ahead of you.

D: You can bet you won't go alone. Or if you get there, you won't see anything. Then we had Young and we had a couple of other people down there who were--on the military side--very sympathetic to doing things differently and cutting red tape.

G: Did you know Bob Montague?

D: Very well. Montague was down in the Seventh Division, though, with another bright light in the army who faded later on, used to be Vance's aide, Jack Cushman. I'm getting as bad as Cabot. He used to be one of the real bright lights. I knew Montague of course. Montague and I were in the same staff division in the general staff before I went to Vietnam, a very, very smart fellow.

G: Fred Ladd?

D: Fred Ladd was around, too, yes. Ladd was older. Montague was really--I think Montague may very well have been at that time one of the two or three brightest guys in the whole army; very, very sharp fellow and had a lot of good ideas. He since left the army in sort of high dudgeon,

Dunn -- I -- 43

got involved with the volunteer armed services and became dissatisfied with his treatment. I still see him every once in a while.

G: He's with the Kennedy Foundation?

D: He's since become, by army standards, a real leftwinger. He's devoted to the Kennedys, as they say. That's anathema to most army officers; they can't understand that. I used to spend a lot of time with him. He used to come up and see me a lot, and he was definitely one of my prime personal contacts and something of a rebel himself in a lot of ways.

G: He made pacification a kind of an avocation?

D: That's right. He became very close to Komer. You know, Bob Komer. That's right. And he worked for Komer in the White House, too, you know, later on. There's a lot of that--what's his name, [George] Tanham came over and heard that and he and I were close over a long period of years, too. I used to know a lot of these fellows over a long, long period of time. It wasn't that big a group. If you were an insider, you keep running into the same people, time after time after time.

G: What was the reaction in Washington to the Khanh coup?

D: I think they were shellshocked by that time, bemused. I think they were more upset with the way it happened and the lack of notice. McNamara seemed to make a ready and almost complete accommodation; I've had a drawer full of pictures of him going around the country with Khanh. I used to follow him around on those jaunts, too. He [McNamara] would introduce him, hold his hand up in the American style of political campaigning. I think probably General Taylor was a little bit less enchanted, because I think he saw Khanh as a somewhat less subtle man than was needed to do the job. But the Americans generally liked him.

G: His English was pretty good, wasn't it?

Dunn -- I -- 44

D: Excellent. His English was excellent. He came out to Leavenworth while I was there and addressed the students, you know, at the Command and General Staff College, and I think most of them were absolutely enthralled by him because he was so easy to understand--he didn't speak English; he spoke American; American army as a matter of fact is what he spoke. He had mastered the "vehicular traffic" syndrome.

G: Well, what became of him? Do you know where he is now?

D: I heard where he was at one point, but I don't--I think he went to Paris first, surprisingly enough.

G: Wise man.

D: Yes, yes. Nice place to be.

G: Do you have to--?

D: I've got a lunch.

G: Well, I can cut us off at any time.

D: Well, if you've got anything you want to add, go right ahead, I've just been rambling on, go ahead.

G: Well, I wanted to go through the spring of 1964 right quickly and I guess the place to go is to ask you when did you become aware that Ambassador Lodge was not going to be in Saigon too much longer?

D: When I sold my Chevrolet.

G: I beg your pardon.

D: There used to be an in-joke. Do you know [Barry] Zorthian? Have you ever talked to Barry? Well, he's around here now and he and I are on some boards together still, but he used to say, "That's when everybody knew Lodge was leaving, when you put an ad in the embassy paper that you were going to dump that Chevrolet."

G: Well, what prompted you to put the ad in?

Dunn -- I -- 45

D: He told me he was leaving. I wasn't going to stay ten seconds behind him, I'll tell you that. He decided very shortly before he left; it wasn't a long--

G: Not much notice.

D: Not much notice.

G: Well, we mentioned before that your position was rather delicate, because--

D: Tenuous is the word I believe I'd use.

G: All right, and was that why you decided you weren't going to stay ten seconds--?

D: Oh, sure, there wasn't any place for me after this. I mean I fully understood that my time to leave had come when his time came, sure.

G: Well, how do you go about that? Do you go to the army and say, "I'm ready to come back"?

D: I had an agreement before I went out. I'm actually that rarity in an army officer; I'm actually smarter than I look. Most army officers look smart and they don't live up to their promise, but I have a hidden reserve of caginess that comes out in times of life-threatening which has kept me--because, after all, you know, I have a history of being with people who don't quite pull it off. You know, I was Mr. [Spiro] Agnew's assistant and his deputy chief of staff at the time that he left. And then I went with Mr. Nixon, just in time to be down there waving him off on the helicopter. So, as the fellow says, "A man with a little less highly developed instinct for self-preservation probably wouldn't be sitting here in these gorgeous surroundings today." I knew when to leave is what I'm saying in a long, roundabout way.

G: How long after Lodge left did you leave?

Dunn -- I -- 46

D: Momentarily. I phased out as soon as he did--but then when he came back again, oddly enough, he wanted me to join him again. Well, I was then still stationed at Fort Leavenworth, because it wasn't long between tours. They decided--whoever they may be--that Mr. Taylor or General Taylor was not the solution or whatever, and I don't know to this day what made them fix on Lodge again. Your man made the decision, in essence. This is where Lyndon Johnson really makes a very important decision, in my judgment, by selecting him to go back. And I'm not too sure it was that clever a decision, candidly. I think he bought on to a lot of the same by doing that. I think a clean break then might have been very desirable.

G: Did you come back with Mr. Lodge?

D: Well, he asked. As I say, this is my last fun anecdote of the day, but I was down at Fort Bliss, Texas, on a review of artillery matters or something, and I got this quick call from the commanding general down there, "Come at once," you know, to the Secretary of the Army's office. Wanted me in Washington, see. That's the first I heard of it. He had gone to--I guess what he said to Lyndon Johnson was, "If I'm going to take this job, I've got to have people I can trust," or whatever, which is what he'd done the first time. And I said, "Hey, I've spent practically the whole time that you've been out at Beverly recuperating and retraining myself in the army, and I'm back where my present superiors think I'm a fairly decent American again. I don't"--"Come to Washington and help me get ready." And then I got a call from Secretary Vance, who was at that time secretary of the army; he says, "Come." He didn't say how to come. "At once, do not pack, do not pass Go." I'd given him my word and that's it. So I went up and I spent quite a long

Dunn -- I -- 47

time with him again up there roaming around, I must say with a certain amount of enjoyment, because it's always fun to come back and see the guys that gave you a hard time. You know the old story about never be too rough to a guy on the way down because he may be on another elevator going up.

There I was, as they say, the darling of the establishment, momentarily at least. I decided, and he supported me--he's been a true friend to me. Cabot Lodge. I really regard him as one of the primary influences in my life and one of the few true friends I think that I've ever had. I just admire and respect him beyond all description. And he simply respected my wishes and didn't press me to go--you know, I put him on the plane, took him all the way up to Boston and put him on the--they gave him one of those special mission aircraft to go over on.

G: KC-135.

D: Yes, except I think I got him a 137 if memory serves me correctly, understanding those things better than some. That's the one with windows.

You know, got off the plane, waved him goodbye and let him go. But he used to keep in touch with me. And I used to hear--you know, I stayed out at Leavenworth until I went to the National War College and, jeez, John Vann would call me and all these fellows like him all the time saying, "Come at once. You're needed." Nonsense. I never felt that my contribution was so important that I should--

G: Let me ask you one more question, and I promise to let you go.

D: All right.

G: What is the story behind--?

D: I hope I haven't rambled on too much for you.

Dunn -- I -- 48

G: Not at all. What is the story behind the multifaceted problem of Lodge's skills as an administrator and the role that David Nes was supposed to play?

D: Well, Trueheart was a very skilled diplomat and I saw him afterwards a few times off and on--I think a shrewd man. He was not administratively inclined, as is indeed the case with most diplomats. I think most people would agree. Nes was supposed to bring to the mission a certain flair for administration, which is to say it was intended that he introduce to the company a regularity that had been missing in the past. I think in that regard he was a disappointment, but it may or may not have had anything to do with his real or imagined skill. I think, one, the assembled group was not ready for this. You know, efficiency was furthest from their minds, either individually or collectively in certain instances. And he didn't get a hell of a lot of backing either from the top, because it didn't take the Ambassador long to see that the more formal things became, the more apt he was to be shut off from the flow of information that in essence had sustained him on certain critical areas. I just think that was one that was just not destined to work. It doesn't work in Washington. Why the hell should it work in Saigon, nine thousand miles away?

G: What was behind his relatively short tenure? I mean he was there only about six months.

D: Well, he wasn't the right man for the time. Without in any way derogating or denigrating his qualifications or his qualities, it was a different sort of fellow that was needed to float on those turbulent seas. He was not nearly as adept at the kind of high-class bureaucratic infighting that went on there all the time as a man would have had to have

Dunn -- I -- 49

been to survive. And he clearly didn't have a rabbi back here of sufficient importance to defend him from that. Bill Porter went out the second time with Lodge, and that was one of the most instructive periods of my life in the sense that he interviewed large numbers of people in order to pick a second, because he rightly understood the second time he went out he was going to have his own man as number two. He wasn't going to have somebody handed to him or whatever. I would hesitate to speculate on the number of names that went across his desk, but it was legion.

G: But he chose Porter personally?

D: He chose Porter personally, probably for all the wrong reasons, [but] he got the right man, as is so often the case. He was from Massachusetts, you know, and lived by the sea and managed to have an accent that was not too dissimilar from those that the Ambassador grew up with and all that sort of thing. But I have a very high regard for Porter, too. I knew him quite well later on in another incarnation when he was the ambassador to Korea. I worked on that troop withdrawal over there. You know, when they were trying to cut the divisions, and he was our ambassador at that time.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of
JOHN MICHAEL DUNN

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, John Michael Dunn, of Washington, D.C., do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of a personal interview conducted on July 25, 1984 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
- (2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.
- (4) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Donor

Date

Archivist of the United States

Date

John M. Dunn
25 October 1990

Nov 7 1990