

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 22, 1984
INTERVIEWEE: FREDERICK W. FLOTT
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: The Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2, Side 1

G: Mr. Flott, could we begin with the first question: what were the circumstances of your assignment to Saigon in 1963?

F: Well, it was a position as a special assistant to Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge. I was brought out there by him at his choice and his decision. Mind you, if I had wanted to decline the assignment, I probably could have, but I was very interested in going; I was honored that he asked me, in part at the suggestion of his son George, who had been the assistant secretary of labor and with whom I'd worked. Ambassador Lodge knew that I'd traveled in the Soviet Union with Bob Kennedy, who of course had defeated his son in their Senate race in about 1962, I guess. He thought--partly because of the duties he had in mind for me, which we'll get to later--it would be very useful to have somebody who had good personal access to Bob Kennedy and was a known quantity to him and President Kennedy, and also whom he knew to be loyal to him, Lodge, both on Republican Party grounds and family friendship grounds.

G: How were you contacted? Did he call you, or--?

F: His son called me and said, "Look, the old man is worried about staff, and I think you ought to go out there with him." And they invited me up to the family home in Beverly, north of Boston--I was in Washington--to

Flott -- I -- 2

go sailing with them on his yacht. Some of this is a little comical, but Lodge had me take the wheel of his yacht, which I guess is how New Englanders analyze character. I didn't drive the boat into any rocks or anything. But, more seriously, we talked about the mission and his plans, and I think it was largely just a question of being personally acceptable to Mrs. Lodge and to him. But it was that kind of appointment. It was based on all of those things.

Lodge said he had had very bad experience with the State Department and with the Foreign Service--he thought it was bad experience anyway--when he was up at the United Nations. And so his first inclination was to choose his own staff, when he had the clout to do it. President Kennedy did tell him he could take anyone to Saigon who was willing to go, and he could send anyone home whether he was willing to leave or not. And so he thought, "Well, anyone the State Department assigns to me may be hopeless, so therefore I will pick my own people among the State Department crowd," and he was making his own decisions. Later he learned and adjusted to the fact that the State Department assigns some very able people, and that, all things considered, he would do just as well by their assignments as by his own selections.

He told me when he was interviewing me for this position that he was very disturbed by what he saw in Paul Kattenburg, who was the country director for Vietnamese affairs, who's presently a professor at the University of South Carolina, after early retirement from the department.

G: What was he disturbed about?

F: It was sort of ad persona observations; the guy seemed to him a little bit flighty, a little bit fuzzy on the mission--you know, not hard-line

Flott -- I -- 3

mission oriented, and he just wasn't comfortable with it. He didn't think he was especially wise or especially committed to the goals of the administration, which he, Lodge, as a Republican appointed by a Democratic president, was about to serve loyally and well, and more gung ho than anyone else. It was that sort of reaction, I think. I know Paul Kattenburg personally and have high regard for his knowledge and judgment, but I can see how Lodge might quite honestly have had some concern--and of course, this was in July of 1963. I suppose it would be fair to say the State Department had not quite yet put in its first team on Vietnam. It did later, but at the time, there were there some people who were available for assignment to what at that time was something of a backwater, or at least a place that traditionally had been something of a backwater.

G: Did you know Ambassador [Frederick] Nolting?

F: Yes.

G: Was there any kind of feedback on how the job he had done was being received back in Washington? Was he in bad odor or good odor or--?

F: Like many of these things--because Americans high in public life are usually very decent people; they don't want to hurt anyone, but also they tend to think that anyone that disagrees with them just doesn't understand the problem--there were a lot of reservations about whether he understood the problem, whether he was too committed to [Ngo Dinh] Diem and [Ngo Dinh] Nhu, whether it was time for a change, whether he was hard-charger enough; there was all that. And on the part of people like Averell Harriman and [Dean] Rusk and all, I'm sure it was handled with total gentility. With Lodge there were some rather abrupt incidents in dealing with Nolting.

Flott -- I -- 4

G: Really?

F: Yes, at CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific], when we were on our way out to Saigon, we stopped in Honolulu and Nolting was there and offered to brief us. He was on his way back to Washington, and it was very much understood that he would be out of Saigon before Lodge got there. But it's common practice to do that; that was certainly not an ad persona phenomenon. But at Honolulu, Ambassador Nolting very graciously offered to be debriefed and to talk at any length that Lodge might want, and Lodge simply remarked that he had nothing to learn from him and was not seeking the interview, and I'm not even sure there was a polite handshake for the photographers. If there was, that was all there was. That was the Ambassador coming back from Saigon on his way back to the department.

G: That's a little abrupt, isn't it?

F: Yes, abrupt, and to my mind, unwise, because even if you thought Nolting was a failure and totally wrong in everything he ever did or said, you'd still want to get a feeling for the guy for damage assessment, if for nothing else. But it was Lodge's manner, in cases of that sort--but again, there was some purpose in his method. He thought he was on a game plan, too, which was to convey very dramatically that it was a new team taking over and new emphasis. A lot of things he did where people thought he was insensitive to other people's feelings and all, there was perhaps that more than an extenuating set of circumstances, a very real game plan and purpose that he thought he had a charter to do.

G: What sort of charter did he think he had? Now this is before the famous August 24 telegram from Washington.

Flott -- I -- 5

F: Yes, this was when he was on his way out to Saigon.

G: Yes. Was he supposed to convey to Diem that we were getting tougher or that policy was changing, or what?

F: That the American ambassador was no longer so committed to Diem, and that Diem had to fly straight and level and meet our policy requirements, and that he could not presume that just because somebody was the American ambassador, that Diem already had him persuaded and in the bag.

G: Which, I take it, is what the opinion of Ambassador Nolting had been.

F: Well, it was a certain perception of Nolting. I have enough respect for Ambassador Nolting and Paul Kattenburg and Bill Trueheart and all these good people to think that they probably knew the pros and cons of Diem and the limits of his government. The truth of the matter is that a career foreign service officer in an ambassadorial position does not operate in the same way that a former member of the U.S. Senate does. He operates under different footwork and different rules. So I would hesitate to evaluate just how much Nolting or any of the others knew about the limitations of Diem, but by and large my personal view was that anything that was apparent to me was surely apparent to any of these other players, who are just as perceptive as I am and who had had a lot more time in country, and whose judgment and patriotism were just as high as my own.

G: What was the nature of your specific duties when you got to Saigon?

F: I suppose I should begin by saying what the concept was for which I was recruited, and what we were supposed to be doing. I must say--to tell the end of the story first--it did not turn out anywhere near what we had planned, partly because the contingencies that we had anticipated

Flott -- I -- 6

didn't quite arise in the form we thought and then the whole coup made a new ball game of it.

But what Lodge really chose me for was the following, and here he was drawing on his UN experience and experience with other countries. And I must say the concept was realistic; I'm certainly not criticizing him for having seen this as a worthwhile mission, and I certainly liked the idea as he spelled it out to me. There were a number of things. One was he understood that there was a significant émigré community of Vietnamese who'd fled Diem, who were living in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Washington or Paris. Now Lodge knew, and he was very disciplined about what the rules of the game are for an ambassador, that an ambassador accredited to a friendly government cannot flit around spending long hours being spoken to by opposition types, and cannot seek them out, at least not aggressively, and that sort of thing. And he was going to have me do some of that for him. And it made sense, because at my level, coming from his office, I could credibly do that and they would have talked to me. I know what my skills and limitations are, and I would indeed have been the right person for that kind of a job. So he came to the right person, and he had a real job in mind.

I think another part that's inseparable from this--and this gets back to almost Lodge lore--was that he hated to fly trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific or to fly in airplanes, even, and I think he thought, "Oh God, Vietnam is a hot spot. They're going to want me back there in the White House about once a month. I hate jet lag in planes, so I'm going to have a guy who is of confidence to me and privy to all my affairs, who can go back and answer their questions, at least part of the time."

Flott -- I -- 7

Well, for one thing, I'm not sure that would have been acceptable to the administration anyhow, but maybe for some things it would have been, conceivably, because I did indeed have good relations with Bob Kennedy, and Lodge knew this. So he thought that if he did take the route of having a leg man whom he could send back to brief on what was going on, viva voce, that I would be personally acceptable to them. That was certainly true and correctly perceived, that I'd probably be the right one to do it, that I was personally loyal to him, that I would be loyal to him in my reporting to them. All this was correctly perceived. The only thing is that as things turned out, there didn't prove to be a great need for that function. When I mentioned earlier the émigrés--as you may know, on the Taiwan scene, which was recent history, there was the whole third-force phenomenon. Somebody has to talk to the third force, which was neither Chiang Kai-shek nor Mao Tse-tung-oriented. But if Lodge couldn't do it, well, he had me on tap to see these people wherever they might be.

But in general, it was special missions and in-house advice, sort of an in-house counselor of his choice and in his confidence.

G: No administrative duties.

F: I personally did not. Mike Dunn did. It was very clearly understood that Mike Dunn was going to be the honcho for administrative affairs, for mission management and for liaison with the U.S. military. And I was the honcho for non-routine political affairs. Now Lodge did, of course, have a counselor of embassy for political affairs, but he wanted somebody closer to him, of confidence to him, a known quantity to him. And again, one of the reasons my mission changed direction was that

Flott -- I -- 8

Lodge saw that the State Department had put a thoroughly competent fellow in as political counselor, and continued to, and continued to do so.

G: This was who?

F: That was Mel Manfull, when we got out there. But he had a good team of people, even then. And Lodge gradually thought, "I don't really need my own private political counselor. I've got a perfectly good political section in the embassy." So he encouraged me to integrate my efforts with the embassy political section as quickly as possible and become another line officer, another first secretary in the political section. This arrangement made sense in the eyes of all concerned.

But it was also true that anything I did had the imprimatur of Cabot Lodge. The Vietnamese knew that. When we got out there, I lived in the Lodge residence for some weeks, and I had arrived on the same plane with him and Mrs. Lodge and Mike Dunn. So there were certain things that I was personally well situated to do, in part because of the imprimatur. For example, as a modest first secretary, I was routinely in direct contact with the foreign minister of Vietnam, and could have access to the vice president of Vietnam when I wanted to. Also, I had been assigned by Lodge to handle the whole French account, and had very friendly collegial access to the French chargé d'affaires. For most matters at my level, anything where it was just a question of getting something done, the French were perfectly willing to deal with me, because they knew--and I'll mention this later--that Lodge had established me as his honcho for all French affairs. I could give you more detail on how that came about and all, but that was one of my duties, and if Lodge assigned you to any duty, people accepted you at it.

Flott -- I -- 9

For example, Lodge was invited to join the Rotary Club. You may know that the top rule of Rotary is you've got to be the number-one man in your profession, and only one man from each profession can be in the local Rotary. Well, Lodge was simply too busy to do it, and it was basically a French-speaking, French-oriented Rotary, and since I was bilingual in French, he said, "Fred, why don't you take on this chore and represent me there?" And the Rotary people were delighted. They would, of course, rather have had Lodge himself, but they knew that wasn't realistic, and they knew I was very close to him and had lived at the residence and all and came out with him. The fact of the title of special assistant to Lodge enabled me to do things that other first secretaries probably could not do. I also did virtually all of the French-language interpreting, with the GVN and for high-level American visitors.

I wouldn't suggest at all that my mission fell apart once we got there; it's just that things evolved, things changed, and of course the biggest thing was the coup comparatively shortly after we got there. We were no longer receiving entreaties from émigrés about how the Diem government should be changed.

G: How would you characterize the state of affairs in the embassy and the country team when you arrived? Was there dissension, was--?

F: Oh, yes. There was a strong diversity of opinion and sharp disagreements among various elements of the mission. All of this was handled, for the most part, very professionally; nobody was attacking people ad persona for their views, or very rarely. But some people disagreed sharply with the views of the situation held by others, and different

Flott -- I -- 10

people had their own "clients" among the Vietnamese, their own sources, and some thought, "My source is better than your source and more reliable." But they worked as a team. I would say there was no flagrant leaking of stuff; the embassy didn't leak like a sieve. It was occasionally seething with disagreement and dissent, perhaps, but it wasn't leaking like a sieve.

G: The disagreement was over what should be done about Diem?

F: Among other things. But also about the Special Forces, about--

G: You mean Diem's Special forces?

F: --Colonel [Le Quang] Tung--yes--his special forces regiment or whatever it was, and what should be done about the Nhus, whether we should avoid the Nhus; whether we should cut so-and-so off at the knees, or whether we should not, and all of that sort of thing. Different people had many different views.

G: Could you draw lines between the agencies on these things, or was it strictly--was it between field operators and mission headquarters?

F: I would acknowledge that I suppose the conventional wisdom might have been--and I characterize it as the conventional wisdom because it certainly wasn't something I knew, because I'd just gotten there--was that yes, the CIA was perhaps more for Colonel Tung and his group, and MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] was very much for the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam]], and MACV was very loyal to Diem, whereas the political section would be characterized by some as being fuzzy, and perhaps not as tough as they should be. All of these were very superficial perceptions that I'm not even sure were well founded. I think the CIA people--history would tell us--knew what they were talking about, and

Flott -- I -- 11

not much escaped their gimlet glance. Now, that doesn't mean that the case officer who was handling Colonel Tung didn't think that his little project was the best game in town, but I'd say all the agencies had good and responsible views of the matters with which they dealt.

G: The station chief was--

F: Jocko [John] Richardson.

G: Right. Did he have a position in this debate?

F: You know, I wouldn't really pretend to know, because the CIA people, wherever they serve, report to the ambassador directly; they're responsive to command, they do what the executive branch, the White House, tells them to do. I certainly wouldn't want to suggest that Jocko Richardson was following one line and Lodge another. It wasn't that at all.

G: But he got sent home.

F: Yes.

G: Do you know what was behind that?

F: I think it was, very frankly, because at that point in time, Lodge wanted to convey, "Look. A new team has landed; we're performing in a different way; we're pursuing different lines if not different objectives, and if Nhu thought that he had Jocko Richardson's ear to the exclusion of all others, well, now he can digest the fact that Jocko Richardson's no longer in country and Lodge has moved into his house." Which Lodge did. But I think Jocko Richardson was sent home as a device to convey an impression and to make a statement. I happen to know that Mr. [John] McCone, who was the director of CIA, waited for something like three hours to get a minute alone with President Kennedy at the

Flott -- I -- 12

time that took place, saying, "Look, this man's a very good officer. He's coming home in what outwardly is a cloud, if not disgrace. I won't say it's outrageous, because maybe it's being done for a worthwhile purpose, but this man has been a very good officer and is a great patriot and should get a commendation from you directly." And Mr. McCone waited for three hours to get President Kennedy to agree to do that. But I elaborate on that in some detail because there were a lot of decisions of that sort made, where nobody was evil, nobody was bad, nobody was necessarily wrong, but it was a question of projecting certain images in order to serve a perceived political purpose.

G: There was a shift in the tide.

F: Yes. Yes. And they wanted it symbolized, and all the more so when this person had been working very close to someone who was perceived as a big obstacle, namely Ngo Dinh Nhu.

G: Right. Well, now, you've mentioned that there was a lot of dissension--well, maybe that's the wrong word--disagreement, within the embassy, and that the embassy was not leaking like a sieve, although when you have that sort of disagreement, the likelihood of leaks, I suppose, increases. What was the status of our relations with the press in Saigon at this time?

F: I think the mass of the foreign press in Saigon thought that Ambassador Nolting, and probably Jocko Richardson, were too uncritically pro-Diem, and even pro-Nhu. Again, I personally would challenge whether these two very able people would be very far off the mark on anything they looked at, and I would also question whether some of the press people who were there at the time knew anything any better than these people did. But anyway, that was the perception.

Flott -- I -- 13

The press was also--as it so often is--in an adversary role. People were trying to keep some things secret; the press was trying to penetrate these secrets. The press traveled around the countryside more; they knew a lot of horror stories, and they knew a lot of fantastic things that they felt others in Saigon didn't know as well as they did. They thought the U.S. government was blind to certain weaknesses of the GVN, the Government of Vietnam, and perhaps the press was not as conscious as it should have been of the fact that an ambassador accredited to a friendly government has to deal with that government within the accepted lines of diplomatic behavior. And even his staff will do the same, which doesn't mean they're any less perceptive than the press who think they've missed the mark.

G: Was there a press policy for your guidance or the guidance of the embassy?

F: The press policy, I would say, was very clear and it was enunciated by Cabot Lodge. He said he was his own spokesman. Among your telegrams there, there is one when he agrees to the assignment of Barry Zorthian to Saigon. He said, "I want him to understand that he will not deal with the press or be the spokesman, that I'm the spokesman and I deal with the press myself." Now, whether that's really possible, that was certainly Ambassador Lodge's position. And again, I'm not suggesting that that was a mistake on his part. He wanted to deal with the press; he'd had a lot of experience with the press in his various political campaigns and as a senator and at the UN, and he was very skilled at dealing with them.

G: As I recall, and correct me if I'm wrong, he had not had a particularly favorable press back in the United States.

Flott -- I -- 14

F: Lodge?

G: Right.

F: Perhaps not.

G: My impression is he had a very good press in Saigon.

F: I would say in general he did, yes.

G: Was that due to his skillful handling?

F: He worked on them very hard. I don't know if this gets into more detail than you're really interested in, but you may know that he allowed Keyes Beech and one other journalist to fly with us and arrive with us when we first flew into Saigon. In fact, if it doesn't interrupt your planned chronology, we could do the chronology of our trip out, because it illustrates things that--I'll get back to the subject of the press on this in an anecdotal way as we move toward Saigon.

We left Washington, whatever the date was, and Lodge was concerned about jet lag and being tired, and he wanted to be very fit and up to form when he arrived in Saigon. He'd heard that the climate was very tiring. So we crossed the Pacific in very gentle laps. First of all, he flew out from Boston to San Francisco, stayed a day or two, recovered those three hours, then went on to Honolulu where Mike Dunn and I joined him. He spent a couple of days there, two or three days recovering, and then we flew the leg by jet from Honolulu to Tokyo, which wasn't back-breaking. And there the plan was we'd rest for several days in Tokyo. Mind you, this was not all resting. We consulted all along; we consulted with CINCPAC in Honolulu and we consulted with our embassy in Tokyo and with the regional military commands in Japan. The plan was to spend several days in Tokyo, and this was not frivolous time; Lodge had

Flott -- I -- 15

in mind seeing a lot of his old friends, distinguished Japanese ambassadors or foreign ministers from the United Nations period. Lodge would have been putting in many good ticks for the administration's programs with all these stops.

Then, not to move too fast, go from Tokyo down to Manila and Hong Kong, possibly even Taiwan. I'm not sure Taiwan was on the list, but do it in small bites, not to get too much jet fatigue, and then eventually fly into Saigon, when all the ducks were in line and with proper notice.

Well, we got, with this program, as far as Tokyo. We arrived in Tokyo, at 5:00 p.m. Japanese time, had a meeting with some former Japanese ambassador to the U.N. who was a personal friend of the Ambassador, and Mike Dunn and I sat in on that. And because we'd had a long flight and all, Lodge soon excused himself, took a walk, and about seven o'clock in the evening, Tokyo time, retired. And the plan was, we were going to have several days there, and one thing he was going to do was he was going to interview the Buddhists the next day. Now, there were a couple of Vietnamese refugee Buddhists there, and the political section of Embassy Tokyo had arranged to bring them in, and Lodge was going to have a leisurely talk the next day with them.

That's all I remember of the plans for several days in Tokyo: talks at the foreign office, the embassy, the military, all that. Well, Lodge went to bed about seven o'clock, and about nine o'clock I got a call from the embassy. We were staying at the Okura Hotel, which was right next door to the embassy, and they called me over and said we had an immediate telegram from the White House, and to charge over and get it. So I got over there quickly, and it was from the President to

Flott -- I -- 16

Lodge, informing him that there had been one more egregious development on the Buddhist thing; I forget whether it was one more immolation--no, I guess Nhu had raided the pagodas. The pagodas had been raided and President Kennedy said, "Lodge, cancel your step-by-step plan; get down there tomorrow. Leave Tokyo tomorrow morning. However, do not leave Tokyo without first talking with the two Vietnamese Buddhist monks and nuns who you're supposed to see in the next few days anyway. See them, then leave, and the military will put a plane at your disposal." We'd been traveling commercial jet until then.

G: Why was he supposed not to put off the meeting with the Buddhists?

F: Because it was a statement that President Kennedy, to whose political instincts I'd certainly defer, wanted to make. He wanted to make it very clear that the incoming American ambassador was touching base with the Buddhists, and that the United States of America was not having any part of kicking around Buddhists or raiding other people's churches.

G: Okay.

F: It was a good Kennedyesque statement that Lodge agreed with completely. They were both sort of on the same wave length in terms of political footwork and conveying impressions.

It was then about nine-thirty in the evening. I had the job of belling the cat, and that at great risk of getting my head lopped off: I had the job of waking up Ambassador Lodge at nine-thirty in the evening and telling him that. He was grumpy at first: "Why are you waking me up in the middle of the night?" And I said, "Well, sir, it's a telegram from the President with instructions about what we're to do tomorrow morning early." So he reluctantly acknowledged yes, I was

Flott -- I -- 17

probably right in waking him up. Mrs. Lodge was very gracious, saying, "Fred! How delightful to see you! Won't you come in? Won't you have a glass of orange juice with us?"

(Laughter)

That sort of thing. She, as usual, was delightful and treated me almost like one of her sons, trying to get me off the hook.

So, we agreed on certain things. Then I went back to my room. Mike Dunn in the meantime was putting a plane together, making arrangements to get a plane. We had a--what was the old four-engine Lockheed called? Lockheed Constellation. It was a good turboprop or prop plane, and this was a VIP-configured Lockheed turboprop. I think it even had a few bunks in it. And that was made available to us to fly down to Saigon. When Lodge heard that, he objected: "Well, this is a prop plane. Why do they give me a prop plane when all those Democratic politicians (the Kennedy cabinet) are flying around in jets?" That was his observation to me; I don't think he made that as a general statement. I explained to him that the Lockheed was a very safe, proven plane that had been around for a long time and maybe it was safer after all. Well, he agreed that that might well be right and that was certainly the way to go.

(Laughter)

So after establishing to his satisfaction the airworthiness of the Lockheed Constellation we went back to bed. Mike was working very hard, making all kinds of logistics arrangements.

The next thing was I got a call about three o'clock in the morning. Lodge was getting more and more irate with all these interruptions

Flott -- I -- 18

of his sleep, and Mrs. Lodge was running out of new bases on which to be cheerful and seeming delighted to see me. So about three o'clock in the morning Mike Dunn came in and said, "Fred, there's a problem. It's in your department. Two press people, the UPI guy and the AP guy--the wire services--have learned of Lodge's trip tomorrow, and they want to ride down with him on the plane, but they have to know, so they can phone their offices and all. Will you please go in and get Ambassador Lodge's permission?" So I had the honor of going in and waking him up one more time to ask him for something that might have been controversial. But Mike was right; that was in my area of responsibility, anything that was political operating or judgment of that sort.

I went in and said, "Mr. Ambassador, sorry to wake you up, but the UPI guy and the AP guy have heard of the trip, and they would like to go down and they asked if that would be possible." Lodge was very relaxed and he said, "Fred, I'm glad you came to me with this; you showed good judgment. I think it's a good idea. Yes, we will take them. But tell them this. Tell them this very firmly: two and no more! If anyone else comes around saying 'I want to go on the Ambassador's plane,' the whole deal is off. These two and no more. It's up to them to keep it under their hat and not to tell anyone about it. But yes, we can go with it." That was about three o'clock, three-fifteen.

Then about five o'clock in the morning I got a frantic call from the press attaché, or the chief of USIS [United States Information Service] there, whoever he was, who said there was also a very respected writer for the *Chicago Daily News*, Keyes Beech, who had heard of the thing and wanted to go. In the meantime I think there was also a

Flott -- I -- 19

television crew. Let's see; I guess the first group that wanted to be added on was the television crew, and I went to Lodge with that, and he was again very cordial and friendly at the idea of getting some press, and he said, "Look, I thought I told you clearly no more." And I said, "Yes, sir, but this was presented to us by the press attaché." And he said, "Well, I don't care. I'm the ambassador." And I said, "Sir, the press attaché is a black. He's doing his job. I don't think we'd be serving the administration well if we failed to support a black officer trying to do his job and represent his country well." Lodge said, "Quite right, Fred. Tell them they can come. But that's it, no more. Besides, I don't want them bringing a lot of heavy cameras and stuff on the plane. I don't want that plane to sink."

(Laughter)

"So no heavy equipment, but they can come themselves and talk to me." I said, "Well, sir, could we agree that it's all right for them to bring cameras for their personal use?" "Yes, that's right, keep it light, cameras. I don't want to sink the plane." We already were up to about eight people on a four-engine transport.

So I went back, and then the last person to get in on the thing was Keyes Beech, who'd heard of it, and I found some reason why--again, the press officer had felt he owed him one or had promised he'd get him on, or something, and Lodge very quickly agreed to that. So we had a television crew, plus Keyes Beech, plus AP and UPI, and Mike Dunn and I talked to them all the way down, and they of course talked with Ambassador Lodge as well. And from their point of view, and indeed from our point of view, it was good government all around. They got a very good

Flott -- I -- 20

story; they got eight hours, because the prop planes mercifully fly slowly so we had eight hours elapsed time from Tokyo to Saigon. They knew Lodge's staff; we'd had drinks with them, we'd had meals with them, and Lodge had told them everything he wanted to tell them. They got the feel for the thing and sent in stories that certainly did not disserve our mission.

I get around to that long story, which also gets us to Saigon, as to how Lodge was. He knew the power of the press; he took it seriously, and he wanted to deal with it properly. But he also wanted to do it himself.

G: What if a reporter came and talked to you? Did you have any guidance on what you could tell him, or did you have to report on press contacts, anything of that sort?

F: Well, there's always a discipline of reporting what you say. In my case it was on again, off again, sometimes yes, sometimes no. Like if Dave Halberstam would come around to the residence--Mike Dunn and I lived at the residence, at first--and Dave Halberstam would come around and, for example, if Ambassador Lodge had received him for a drink or tea or a chat, and then Lodge got called away on some emergency, he'd say, "Fred, will you talk to Dave while I'm away?" If I were doing it on direct instructions, that would be all right, or if Dave Halberstam, say, were to have sought me out for something that was appropriately of my competence, or if I had told the Ambassador, "Look, I'd like to talk further with Dave, just to see what makes him tick, what bug he's got in his bonnet, and to hear his story," sure, that was fine, pursuit of my mission. But in the long run, I don't think Lodge would have wanted

Flott -- I -- 21

anyone other than himself being the spokesman. It was just not his style of working, and again, like so many things that Ambassador Lodge did, and so many ways in which he approached his mission and how best to serve the President, he did it with the style of a senator or a very political ambassador in a very political place, like the UN.

G: This next question is not in this vein at all, but we can pursue it. Were you involved in any way in the [Victor] Krulak-[Joseph] Mendenhall visit in September of 1963?

F: Yes, I saw them when they were there. Joe Mendenhall was a colleague, a career foreign service officer. And I knew of, I guess it was General Krulak, as a very knowledgeable marine corps general of whom they spoke highly at CINCPAC. We'd also looked forward to meeting them all, and we did. I didn't go out in the field with them on all their visits or anything, but I had a number of occasions to talk with them in Saigon. I eventually got back to Washington the day of the assassination of President Kennedy, and one of the first people I talked to when I was back there was Joe Mendenhall. First I talked with Bill Sullivan, who is, again, a very dear friend and colleague, and Joe Mendenhall.

G: I was wondering if you had any insight into the way they developed what were apparently two very differing reports on the general direction that things were going in Vietnam, that prompted President Kennedy to ask, "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?"

F: Yes, I remember that incident, and it's true. There--at the risk of sort of opening a long-winded parenthetical remark--I would make this observation about General Krulak, but more generally, it's an observation about the American military in general. And that is, without want-

Flott -- I -- 22

ing to throw stones. First of all, I know this first hand, because I went to a military prep school myself, and I was an officer for three and a half years, an infantry officer in World War II. I know something about how the machine works and how the mind works. I know, for example, that as a young cadet and as a junior officer, I was taught what every single cadet or junior officer would say, "I'm commanding the best damn platoon in the best damn company in the best damn battalion of the best regiment of the U.S. Army, which of course is the best in the world." These logically are rather uncritical judgments, because not everybody is necessarily commanding the best platoon, and people of a more inquiring mind might even admit logically of the possibility of luck of the draw. You get good troops, good replacements out of the repple-depple or bad, but not necessarily everything is the best just because you're in command of it.

The military, on the other hand, seems to have a way of equating unquestioning, almost irrational optimism with loyalty and with suitability for command. That is one of the characteristics of the type, and having been trained that way myself, I know that's how they're trained. I do not question the fact that if your most important task is to take that hill with these thirty-six tired soldiers, that's not even bad training. I'm not questioning how the military trains itself; I am questioning their suitability as a group for making political assessments. Some of the military would acknowledge that, at least to the limited extent that one did in your telegram of General [Paul] Harkins saying that, "My officers know what's going on in the countryside"--one might question that, parenthetically, but he said, "They know what's going on

Flott -- I -- 23

in the countryside, but I'm not suggesting they know what's going on in the palace. They aren't experts at palace gossip." Well that, indeed, they were not. So General Krulak comes out there, reporting to the Commandant of the Corps and to CINCPAC, and with his particular orientation, he would see one set of things, whereas I would say that Joe Mendenhall, as a personality, was perhaps even more analytical and even more inclined to critical judgments and weighing both sides of a question than would even the average foreign service officer or civilian be. So naturally there's a gulf between the two.

G: Did you talk to Mr. Mendenhall about this?

F: Sure.

G: What were the things that bothered him about the situation in Vietnam?

F: He just thought that seeing what he could see, it just didn't strike him as inspiring confidence or looking very good. I probably shouldn't try to say what he said, because I don't remember it all that clearly and I don't want to put words in his mouth. But my guess would be that that would be the range of his comments, and General Krulak would have figured that he ran into some guy out in the boondocks who also thought he was advising the best ARVN battalion, and his brass was well polished and his shoes were shined and his shoulders were back and his stomach in and chin in, and head up, so General Krulak would report with confidence that things looked good out in the countryside.

G: When that party went back, John Mecklin and Rufus Phillips went back with them. Do you remember any of the background of that, why they went? Did they go at the instigation of Ambassador Lodge, or what was behind that?

Flott -- I -- 24

F: I may be wrong on this, but I know that Mecklin very simply was fired from one day to the next, told to leave. That might have been the occasion on which he went back. Or he may have been returning from that trip, before he was fired. I forget which was which.

G: What was he fired for?

F: I would really characterize it as a firing very much like the firing of Jocko Richardson. It was just a way of making a statement. Lodge did not do it with personal vindictiveness, but he wanted to make clear a new team was there, and the message came through louder and clearer if the guy left the next day. But I know in a personal way, the Ambassador and Mrs. Lodge invited both Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. Mecklin to dinner the nights of their respective husbands' departure, and these ladies understood that there were perhaps reasons for doing things the way they were being done, and personally everybody took it reasonably well, or as far as outward appearances went, anyway.

G: Did you know Rufus Phillips?

F: Yes.

G: Did he talk to you about the opinions that he expressed later in Washington when he got back?

F: You know, I just don't remember in that much detail. We had so many things to talk about. I knew his wife; she was an old friend from Washington, and when Rufe was away on the trip, one of the first meals I had out of Ambassador Lodge's residence was when she and I went to have lunch at the Caravelle Hotel, if I'm not mistaken, or the Brink or someplace, and we just talked about mutual friends and family. When I saw Rufe, if I asked him anything, he would have, I'm sure, replied in

Flott -- I -- 25

giving me his best judgment on anything I asked him. But I just didn't have many substantive dealings with him, and I retained the impression that he was regarded as being very well informed. He'd been out there since 1954, and considering we were only off the gangplank since about four days, he came on as quite a regional expert. And I'm sure by any standard he was.

G: Do you know where he tended to come down on this debate that was going on?

F: I don't happen to be all that clear on it.

G: What about the [Robert] McNamara-[Maxwell] Taylor visit which followed almost on the heels of this one?

F: Yes, well, I worked very closely with them; I interpreted for McNamara when we went in with Diem. Lodge and Taylor spoke adequate French and understood most of what was going on in French. Secretary McNamara did not, and for that reason I was there as an interpreter. We also had CINCPAC with us on some of these meetings, too. CINCPAC, Max Taylor, Lodge, and myself, talking with Diem. And my memorandum of that conversation is a matter of record. That was my first interpreting job for McNamara, and I interpreted for him on many other occasions.

G: You're handing me a picture here--

F: That was taken when Lodge presented his letters of credence, some days before the McNamara-Taylor visit--that was the first time I met Diem. See him shaking hands.

G: You're shown shaking hands. Was this in the presidential palace?

F: Yes. That was several days after we arrived, whenever Ambassador Lodge went to present his letters of credence.

Flott -- I -- 26

G: And Diem was wearing that white suit that, I guess--well, I have seen him in mandarin garb, but I think every other time I've seen a picture of him, he's in a white suit.

F: Now again, nine people went with Lodge; Lodge plus eight others, and that was clearly the totem pole of the American establishment in country, and quite properly, the Ambassador, the deputy chief of mission--

G: That would have been Ambassador [William] Trueheart?

F: Yes, subsequently Ambassador Truehart; then Minister-Counselor Trueheart. And the political counselor. The head of AID [Agency for International Development] was there, and General Harkins. We were all going from the residence at ten o'clock in the morning. We all arrived with our *protocolaire* white suits on, and General Harkins was in his white uniform, and all ready to go, and Ambassador [Lodge] called him by his first name and said, "Look"--whatever his first name was--

G: Paul, wasn't it?

F: Paul, yes. "Paul"--or he might even have said General--"my plan is for you to stay here. I want one of us to be outside in case the phone rings or there's some message"--he didn't say, "If the phone rings," but that was the tone--"or in case something comes up or there's some message. And I want a senior officer outside the palace for any contingency, and I'm asking you to do that."

So, again, it's sending signals. The next thing that was very clear was that General Harkins was not in the group that was with Lodge when he presented letters of credence. And I don't think this was petty; I don't think it was personally vindictive. They were, after

Flott -- I -- 27

all, friends and neighbors in Massachusetts. I don't think it was wrong. What I would say was that it was Ambassador Lodge using the tools that he was used to using in pursuit of his mission and what he understood to be the requirements of the situation.

G: I think General Harkins and Ambassador Lodge were schoolmates, weren't they, at Boston Latin?

F: If they're not--in prep school--yes, something like that. I knew they were good friends, and both came from the same side of the tracks up in Massachusetts and all. There is so much ad persona criticism of Ambassador Lodge about having been vindictive or putting down people on purpose or something; it wasn't that at all. He knew what he was doing; he was doing it with the tools he was used to using in the way he was used to doing it. Now, admittedly, a different ambassador would have proceeded in different ways with the same problems, but that doesn't mean one was wrong and the other was right.

G: Did this cause strained relations between General Harkins and the Ambassador?

F: It made it very clear, if it was necessary to make it clear, that General Paul Harkins was not an independent theater commander or anything even resembling it and that he was about one notch above a military attaché, about which I could give you another anecdotal account.

G: Please do.

F: You probably know that in every embassy, every American embassy anywhere in the world, they always have the service attachés, sometimes more, sometimes fewer, but basically all three services have to have a piece of the action. So there's an army, navy, and air force officer, and the

Flott -- I -- 28

senior of the three is designated the defense attaché, depending on how well he fits into the local situation, which gives the United States the most weight where it's needed with the host-country government and military. And I suppose of all things in life, the thing that was most unheard of was having an embassy without having military attachés. Well, one day Lodge was sort of wondering to himself, "Why do we need these military attachés, who take up office space in our embassy chancery?" The office building of the embassy was very small, and there was a shortage of space. The attachés, for good and proper reasons, had good and proper office space. They had their own requirements for what are loosely called code rooms, the communications centers and all, and they had staff and they had cars and all, and they were entertained. Lodge said, "Why do we need this? We have all these sixteen hundred advisers, however many we have; we've got enough military in the country. Why do we need these people?" He just raised the question, and it was slowly being disputed and shot down.

My office was in a small office right next door to Ambassador Lodge's big embassy office, and he could open a side door in his office and pop right into my office. Mike Dunn's office also opened on the Ambassador's, or you'd go through the deputy chief of mission's office to get to Mike's. I think on this occasion Mike was out. But anyway, this all happened, say, roughly two weeks after we got there. And at two o'clock in the afternoon, Mrs. Lodge was alone back at the residence. We had no proper security arrangements at the time; there was a retired Vietnamese policeman, perhaps, pulling guard duty at night or something, and a gardener during the day. It was very relaxed, and no

Flott -- I -- 29

real security around the embassy that would guarantee the well-being of anyone. We were constantly getting death threats, and CIA was getting messages from sources to which they attached some importance, at least, saying there was a plot to bump off Ambassador Lodge, Bill Trueheart, Mike Dunn and myself, and one other person. Everybody who wasn't on the list had their nose somewhat out of joint at not being included! I must say, I didn't lose a lot of sleep over it, but on some nights when Mike Dunn and I thought of how insecure the whole setup was, Mike and I took turns guarding the door to the Ambassador's personal quarters.

The way the embassy residence was, in the sleeping quarters on the second floor, there was what could be described as a private apartment for the Ambassador and Mrs. Lodge, with a big sitting room and two bedrooms, all off at one end. Mike Dunn and I each had very adequate rooms and baths near the stairs. And Mike said, "You know, Fred, I think you and I ought to guard this place, just to make sure," and I agreed. So we took turns sleeping on a rug, for four hours on and four hours off, in front of the door to Ambassador Lodge's private apartment, with a submachine gun or a carbine or something, just in case. Because you never knew what might happen. We were getting so many reports about how the government of Vietnam itself might try to assassinate Lodge, or how Colonel Tung, or how somebody thought they'd heard some generals were going to do it. There were all kinds of rumors, and the only way that Mike Dunn and I could proceed in good conscience was just to make sure that there'd be some noise before they got into Lodge's apartment.

G: Did you mention a Schmeisser submachine gun before we began?

F: Yes.

Flott -- I -- 30

G: Where in the world did you get that?

F: I didn't bring it out to Saigon with me. There was a time, as you know, when the American military involvement in Vietnam was supposed to be nonattributable. So I suppose it was the CIA that was doing it, or the very earliest stages of the advisory effort. They had a lot of non-attributable weapons, including Schmeissers in prime condition. I had used the Schmeisser before and was familiar with it, and they had lots of ammo for it, and it was heavy but I didn't have to carry it anywhere. Lou Conein was an old friend, and kindly offered to give me any weapons I wanted. And I didn't bring any weapons with me from Washington, because I knew I might as well leave my own at home and collect more out there and subsequently perhaps acquire them. So Lou said, "What kind of weapons would you like?" This was in the day when you had to be a politically important province chief to rate an M-16, what was then the AR-15. So I didn't ask for that; it wasn't fair for a garrison soldier to draw down one of those. But I said, "Well, I'd like to have a Schmeisser, and I'd like to have a folding stock paratrooper M-1 carbine, without the selector on it." I never liked the carbine with a full automatic selector.

G: That was the M-2 carbine, I think.

F: Yes. Anyhow, this was an M1A1, with a folding stock for paratroopers. That means you could do aimed rifle fire at up to three hundred yards, if that was what the situation called for, or you could make lots of noise with a Schmeisser and if you had the fire-control discipline of shooting short, five-round bursts, it's a very good weapon. It's not a good weapon for an untrained man; for a trained man it's good. And I

Flott -- I -- 31

was used to it. So I had one of each, and we'd take turns, and Mike or I would sleep there in front of Lodge's door. We only did this a few times. Gradually we got much better organized, because it was clearly not the way to run a railroad. But I thought, and Mike felt, that if by sleeping on a rug in front of the Ambassador's door, if I can do that and the American Ambassador, who's in command of the whole effort in Vietnam, gets a good night's sleep because he trusts us, there's no better way to earn your pay. So we did it. And soon, of course, they had the marine guard shacks, and marines inside, and marines on the roofs of the adjoining buildings, the works!

G: I was going to ask, the marines traditionally guard embassies, don't they?

F: Yes, they guard embassies, more exactly, chanceries--the embassy office building--but they did not traditionally guard residences. At this time the embassy security guard people--there was a good marine complement, I'm sure, but they were spread pretty thin. Some Buddhist priests had taken refuge in parts of the embassy, so they had to give them almost bodyguard protection around the clock; that made claims on their resources. There had been a threat to the AID compound, because that's where one of the Buddhists was hanging out, and Lodge had visited there. So when it became high profile, the thought was, "Gee, we'd better put a couple of marines over there," which means you've pulled six men off the complement, even on a surge basis, and it finally got to the point where that meant there weren't any for the residence. The first time around, Ambassador Lodge said, "No, we want to be a perfectly open mission. I don't want policemen standing in front of my house. We don't need

Flott -- I -- 32

marines here." Then when these death threats came in, and good CIA serious telegrams that people whose judgment we trusted thought something was afoot and that an effort might be made to bump us off, we didn't want to suddenly put a platoon of marines there. We didn't have a platoon in country. So Mike and I improvised. But quickly other arrangements were made, in two or three days.

But anyway, to get back to the story about this day; I was in my office at two in the afternoon. I've given you the atmosphere in terms of security at the residence: there was none. And the naval attaché came in. The attachés were very inclined to do lots of busy busywork, and make themselves very busy. One came in, and he had such a hot piece of information that he felt it was appropriate to tell the Ambassador immediately. He rushed into his office and said, "Sir, we've just received a telephonic report that there's a mob out in front of the Ambassador's residence and that the mob is charging the residence." So Lodge said, "Okay, take off." Lodge came running into my office, said, "Fred, I've just got a report; there's a mob in front of the residence," which was two miles away. He said, "Emily's there alone. I want you to go there with me." I said, "Yep, off we go."

He said, "How do we hit this kind of thing?" because he regarded me as being good at emergencies of that sort. I said, "Okay, the first thing we do, take off your tie so nobody has anything they can get hold of. Secondly, if there's a big mob there, we'll hit them: I'll go first, you follow behind. Don't fix anybody with your eyes. Use your elbows and just steamroller right through to the door. Don't talk to anyone or argue; just plow through and don't fix anyone with your

Flott -- I -- 33

glance, and we'll hit it that way after the car has driven us as close to the epicenter as we can get. Don't fix anyone with your eyes, and loosen your cuffs and loosen your collar." That was while we were driving over there. We got to the residence; there wasn't a soul there.

(Laughter) He and I were really prepared to hit the line.

(Laughter)

And so he went back to the office and said, re the attaché who had reported the mob, "This guy should be fired. And as a matter of fact, all these attachés should be fired." Then he was able to make an even stronger pitch. Secretary McNamara, guided by staff, demurred as long as he could, but ultimately Ambassador Lodge prevailed, and for the first time in history, as far as I know, a military attaché post was terminated. So that's the kind of fun and games we played.

G: That's a good story.

F: That's what I mean about anecdotal stuff that isn't strictly jokes; it illustrates an atmosphere.

G: Can we talk about the coup of 1963?

F: Sure.

G: You mentioned Lou Conein already; you said he was an old friend. How long had you known Lou Conein?

F: Oh, I think I'd known Lou Conein since 1947.

My first diplomatic post was in Paris in 1947, and like all beginning young diplomats who came out there as a vice consul, I was put in the consular section. Lou was already a legend in official circles. Well, this was my first contact with the legend of Lou Conein. Later, on trips up to Germany to see diplomatic colleagues up there, I met Lou

Flott -- I -- 34

Conein and heard all his stories and got to know at first hand this colorful person. So I guess I met Lou first in 1947.

G: He would have been in the army then, I suppose.

F: Yes.

G: But was he detailed to CIA, or--?

F: Something like that. He was probably seconded to CIA. I'm not sure of that, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that such was the case.

G: Right. Was that the last time you saw him until the Saigon days?

F: Oh no, I saw him frequently on other occasions. And during World War II I had been very peripherally involved with the Free French, and I'd been technically--I don't want to exaggerate this at all, but I'd been behind the German lines in occupied France, very much toward the end of the German occupation and for a comparatively short time, and not with great, great hazard to life and limb. But of course, Lou Conein had done heroic things for two years before in occupied France. So we had this bond, or sorts.

G: He had enlisted, hadn't he, in 1939?

F: He'd been in the French Foreign Legion, among other things, so we had in common the fact that we knew France well, we spoke French well, and were interested in things French, and each had war stories to tell the other. Lou had many, many more stories, of course. And as you know, subsequently, after he was through with getting the French Forces of the Interior through the war, he went out to Hanoi and dealt with Ho Chi Minh and all that.

G: That is interesting. Now, back to the coup. The reason I brought up Conein was, of course, he is one of the central figures; as far as I

Flott -- I -- 35

know he was, anyway. There's a lot of uncertainty in my own mind about when a serious coup plot was under way. Some people date it as far back as July of 1963. When were you aware that there was really something afoot, more than a rumor?

F: Immediately on arrival in country and perhaps even from our stay at CINCPAC. I wouldn't swear to it. But I was certainly aware of it the minute I got in country. But again, I'd like to qualify that response. And that is, if somebody asked me today, "Did you know that the coup was coming?" really, and without trying to talk out of both corners of my mouth, really, with equal sincerity and honesty, I could say I did not know it was coming, or I did know it was coming. You could cut it either way. There were so many coups talked about by so many different groups, including some that talked to me, that we certainly knew that the idea of a coup was not being mentioned for the first time. We'd been hearing nothing else for weeks or months, and from many different and disparate groups, even. But I did not know an hour before it happened that it was going to happen. In fact, one of the times I interpreted with Diem was an hour before the coup started--

G: Was that on the occasion of Admiral [U.S.G.] Sharp's visit?

F: No, Sharp came later. This was the Admiral Harry Felt, CINCPAC, visit. Yes. Admiral Felt and FSO Ed Martin, who was the POLAD [political adviser], the career diplomat official at Honolulu.

G: What was that last name, sir?

F: Ed Martin. The political adviser, the State Department adviser to Admiral Felt, accompanied him and sat in on the meeting. The meeting was about ten o'clock in the morning. This was October 31, 1963, and as

Flott -- I -- 36

you know, Lodge was planning to go back to the States then. He'd only just arrived in country, but he was going back to consult, and had an airplane out there for him. And in the limousine riding over with Lodge to our meeting with Diem and Felt and his POLAD and Lodge and myself, on the way going over, I said, "Mr. Ambassador, you're going back; I've just received a message from my family that my mother"--she was eighty years old--"has had a severe attack of phlebitis. If you're going back and flying right back here in fairly short order, I'd sort of like to ask for a hop on the plane. I'll fly out to Chicago, see my mother, and get back and help you in Washington." He said, "Yes, that's all right; that makes sense. Touch base with somebody in the embassy, but, yes, you can come along with me. That's fine." So I asked the political counselor if it would be all right for me to absent myself because of this family illness, and also making clear that the Ambassador had said he had no objection. And the counselor said he thought he could spare me for five days. It was all fairly relaxed.

But anyway--I don't know what got me on that subject.

G: We were talking about the meeting with Felt and Diem.

F: Oh, yes. So at this meeting various things came up, and to catch a plane or to keep an engagement, Felt and his POLAD had to go over and meet some Vietnamese generals, and actually, they were trying to be polite to the generals before they left the country. And the generals, who were all up to their neck in the coup, found it very embarrassing that they had to be polite to this CINCPAC. But they did; they waited for everything until he shook hands with them, and everybody made their salaams. And when Lodge and I were left alone with Diem, Diem said,

Flott -- I -- 37

"Look, I'm very disturbed at the behavior of some of your junior officers. There are all kinds of rumors about a coup and movements of troops against me, and all. You know, there's nothing to this. My army's completely loyal to me; nobody would raise a hand here without my approval. These are vicious rumors that are being spread by junior officers of the CIA." He was very categoric about that. And Lodge said, "Look, if you can find any officer of my country team that is saying disparaging things, things that threaten stability, I promise you I'll fire him out of the country that same day. Just tell me who it is and prove it and they're on their way. That kind of stuff clearly doesn't go. But I can assure you that no one on my instruction is doing anything like that."

Well, we discussed a few other things, and took leave of Diem. And as the junior man of the two of us, I was the last to shake hands with him, and I was probably the last person to shake hands with Diem in his life, because the coup started an hour later and he was dead the next morning.

G: And nobody was shaking his hand in between times.

F: Vietnamese practice and deference to a mandarin personage is such that it's safe to say that nobody was.

G: Yes. That's fascinating, especially in light of what Lodge knew was going on at the time. Were you privy to any of the information that Lodge was getting from Conein about the progress of the plot, and so on, in October?

F: You know, in a way I can really honestly say that while I was privy to bits and pieces of a number of things, I didn't have a really complete

Flott -- I -- 38

picture of anything, and I'm not sure anyone else did, either. I knew, sure, that Conein would report, "So-and-so said such-and-such to me," and he and Lodge would develop a telegram, and the telegram would go back to the States--all the reporting from the embassy or to the embassy I was generally aware of. That doesn't mean I was in the back of the brain of all the Vietnamese generals who were doing it.

G: I don't think anybody was that.

F: And I wouldn't claim that I knew all the beasts that ran in the jungle, either. But I knew a lot was going on; I suppose I realized that if the United States had really wanted to stop it, it probably could have. On the other hand, maybe not. I know that the United States avoided direct action originating involvement, did formally at least avoid that. I knew that Lou Conein had a close personal relationship with General Tran Van Don and Big Minh and others. I personally did not, at that time. I knew them socially; I'd see them whenever there was a big reception. I'd pay my respects to all of them as senior officials and all, but I didn't really know them. So Conein was regarded as the man who handled that group.

G: Were you present when Conein would brief Lodge about the--

F: No. No. Typically enough, Lodge liked to deal one on one; he'd do it that way, with Conein alone.

G: Did Conein talk to you about what was going on?

F: More or less, yes. If Lodge had said, "Look, I don't want you to mention this to anyone, including my own staff," I'm sure Conein would have obeyed. But just because Lodge talked to him privately doesn't mean he would duck telling me something. It also doesn't mean he would. The

Flott -- I -- 39

situation was moving so fast and we had other things to talk of; I'd really be much more inclined to talk with Lou Conein about where we'd have lunch and who some interesting Vietnamese women were, or what kind of a gun he could scrounge for me next.

G: I hear he had quite a collection.

F: He did, at his house, at his little in a little pavilion outside his house. And we'd go there, and over some good bottles of authentic San Miguel beer from the Philippines, he'd say, "You like the AR-15? (It was still in very short supply in Vietnam.) Well, this is mine. I've got one, and we had five others, but we gave them to five key province chiefs as a prestige piece--like getting a two-inch barrel .38 Police Special, with a concealed hammer, no visible hammer, hammerless model."

G: I think General [Nguyen Ngoc] Loan had one of those, didn't he?

F: Yes. In the photo. Lou would say, "I'm sorry, I can't get you one of these right now. Actually you aren't missing much, because I don't have much ammunition for it. It's very hard to get caliber .223 ammo." And the ammo at that time was all marked "Remington UMC commercial-experimental" ammo. I was in the palace one minute after the cease-fire the morning after the coup, and there was all kinds of stuff around the floor. I remember filling all my pockets with cardboard boxes of twenty of these .223 caliber rounds, because I knew my old buddy Lou was short of cartridges for his "weepon," so I was picking it up--I didn't think until later on that there were probably better souvenirs one might have picked up in the palace!

G: This was ammo that the palace guard had had? They were armed with these?

Flott -- I -- 40

F: Yes, the palace guard, these Nungs from Nhu, as a very elite force, did indeed have M-16s, yes. And there was a lot of ammo; not buckets and buckets of it, but if two hundred men had been in a firefight for eight hours, there's bound to be, say, a thousand rounds still in boxes of twenty scattered around. And I busily picked up all I could hold, because I understood it was in short supply and I didn't like waste.

G: Where were you when the coup took place? When did you become aware that the thing was under way?

F: There was an old friend who was leaving the country, from whom I got a butler, named Larry Connel, C-O-N-N-E-L. And again, I had known him from--he had been a colleague at the Laos conference, in the conference on Laos in Geneva, where I had interpreted for Governor Harriman and Secretary Rusk. So he was an old buddy from that conference, and I knew him when I arrived in country. He was one of the comparatively few people that I knew personally, and I just happened to be having lunch with him the day of the coup, up in his apartment. I'd been busy with Lodge at the palace, and I was going off to the States, I thought, the next morning, flying with Lodge when he went back to consult. And I had just moved out of the residence, got a place of my own, my own apartment very near the residence with line of sight for commo [communications]. And Larry Connel, who was leaving, very kindly agreed to supply me with his old servant, Nam. So we had to get together and have a working lunch up at his apartment to plan logistic details, because I was going to be gone for a week. And Larry suddenly got a phone call. I think some of his people notified him that something had started. About one minute after his phone call all hell broke loose with shooting of twenty

Flott -- I -- 41

millimeter and forty millimeter and .50 caliber antiaircraft guns; all the Vietnamese Navy ships along the harbor were opening up, without anything at all to shoot at. But they just wanted to prove that they were on the side of whoever might win, and there was a terrific barrage going up from the ships, although they were not under attack.

So we rushed into the embassy, and I went in, went up to the top floor, in this very old, rickety apartment building with the usual sort of colonial outside passageways, these walkways outside the glass windows, then walkways inside the glass windows to keep you out of the rain. And all the secretaries were running around watching the big shoot-em-up down at the river. And I said, "Look, the most important thing you can do is get in your offices and shut your doors and get away from the glass. Because the one thing that is really disfiguring--if you get a five-hundred-pound bomb with a near miss, and you're standing near a plate glass window, you may have scars for life." So that was about the one useful thing I did. Of course, nothing happened; we didn't get any bombs, but the first thing that occurred to me was get the troops out of the hot sun as far as being near glass.

Then I was in Lodge's office when he had the telephone call from Diem, that four-o'clock-in-the-afternoon call that you probably know of.

G: Has that been accurately reported, as far as you know?

F: What, in a nutshell, is your version of it?

G: That Diem called and asked what the attitude of the United States was toward this coup, and Lodge replied that he couldn't possibly know because it was four o'clock in the morning in Washington, and no one could have formed an opinion, and that he understood that Diem had been

Flott -- I -- 42

made an offer of safe conduct and he was concerned for his personal safety. Diem said that he was trying to restore order. And Lodge, I think, said, "If there's anything I could do to secure your person, let me know." And that, as I recall, is about it. Is that accurate?

F: That's very accurate; it's not quite complete. I'll perhaps add one thing. But that's exactly what happened. Diem called in and said, "What's the explanation for this?" And Lodge said, "I don't know." And Diem said, "What would be your advice?" Lodge said, "Well, you are a chief of state; I cannot give you advice, but personally, and as a friend, and as somebody who is concerned about your health"--probably about his getting a good night's sleep and all--"my suggestion would be you think seriously of getting away. Now, if I can be of any help on that, I'm prepared to send my driver with an officer of mine--"

G: Meaning you.

F: Yes--"to escort you to safety. And we can get you on my jet aircraft, and I'm sure I can deliver on that. One of my officers will ride in the front seat of my limousine with the chauffeur." And of course, I was known as Lodge's special assistant and as an interpreter at the palace. I think that both the military and civilian staff around the palace would be rather likely to defer to American diplomats and the people who were occasionally seen with the President, as I had been in my interpreter role. So I think it is perhaps quite fair to say that there was indeed a very good chance that I could have talked the car into the compound, even though it was under siege. And who knows, maybe something more orderly could have been worked out in the meantime, like getting both commanders to agree to a safe conduct departure in advance or

Flott -- I -- 43

something of the sort, although Lodge had told me he didn't anticipate that they would.

But he had in mind my doing that kind of thing, and occasionally made flattering remarks in contexts that weren't quite clear, such as, "Well, Fred, you're a very brave man, and I'm sure you'd behave well under pressure and under fire." I said, "I hope so, Mr. Ambassador." But then when the question was of assisting President Diem to get out to the airplane, Lodge said, "Now, this is what I have in mind. I want you to ride in the car, and it'll have American flags. You go up to the gate and go in and get him and bring him out if he agrees to being evacuated." So I was definitely tabbed to do that, and that in fact was why I happened to be in the Ambassador's office at the time Diem telephoned Lodge.

And who knows, you know, there might have been some other game plans as well. For example, it might be that General Harkins could have gotten permission from the generals to get in there with a helicopter. But there was a plan and a well thought-out effort by Lodge to save Diem's life. If Diem had accepted our good offices to assure his escape to security, Lodge was prepared to assist and was prepared to have me up in the front seat of his automobile while doing so.

G: But the upshot of that would have been that Diem would have left the country.

F: Yes. And Diem said, "No, I cannot agree to fleeing, because this is all a tempest in a teapot; it's a couple of hothead generals who don't speak for the army, and I know that the real troops are loyal to me and will soon have this all straightened out." And Lodge said, "Well, Mr.

Flott -- I -- 44

President, that is your decision, certainly. I cannot advise you one way or the other. But as I've said, if I can ever be of any assistance in looking after your security, I would certainly do so." Then Diem said, "Well, I want you to tell Washington that this is being done, and that I want them to land the BLTs [battalion landing teams], the two marine BLTs on the aircraft carriers offshore, I want them to land and protect the palace." And Lodge said, "Well, you know, it's four o'clock in the morning in Washington; we can't do that." Sort of a Lodge-like answer! He was always concerned about getting a good night's rest and allowing others to do so as well.

G: Were you interpreting?

F: No, no. Lodge was speaking with Diem. I was just listening. You see, Lodge spoke very good French, but because of his position he could not interpret for CINCPAC or other visitors, which was why I did it.

G: I understand, I was just wondering how you knew what was coming from the other end. Was this a radio conversation or a telephone--

F: No, it was telephone. It was not one of these old French phones with an *ecouteur*, where you could pick up another headpiece and listen. No, the phone was far enough from Lodge's ear so I could hear Diem. Of course, I was used to his voice. I didn't get it all, and I didn't make a transcript, but I could certainly hear everything that Lodge said to him and much of what Diem was saying. Like many people, Diem sort of shouted over the phone; Lodge would hold it away from his ear, and I was seated right beside him, so I pretty much heard him. Lodge filled me in currently, and later, too.

Tape 2 of 2, Side 1

Flott -- I -- 45

- G: Ambassador Lodge was perfectly willing to send his car and driver and you to--
- F: I think there's no doubt about it, that Lodge was willing to do anything he could to get Diem out of the country alive, if Diem wanted to do it. I also think Lodge could have delivered on it, and I know he no doubt had other plans, but one plan he had was for me to go in the front seat of his limousine, which was a big old Checker Cab, and go to the palace with the American flag, and talk our way through the thing, or hopefully with arrangements already having been made between the commanders of the coup.
- G: Do you think you would have been let through?
- F: On balance, I do, yes. Taking Vietnam as it was in October of 1963, I think there was a good chance, yes.
- G: You say you got into the palace only an hour after it was taken.
- F: That was the next morning.
- G: I see.
- F: Roughly at 6:00 a.m. I stayed up all night at the embassy, watching as the situation developed, and incidentally, hearing Lou Conein reporting in from the coup's command post about every five minutes.
- G: Could you judge his state of mind from what he was saying?
- F: Not so much. Now there--I wouldn't swear. Where I actually heard him, I went down to wherever the CIA office was in the embassy, and the acting chief received me there, and said, "We're getting all these reports from Lou." They might have been sort of broadcast within the office by a loud-speaker system on the phone. I may have heard him directly. Maybe I was just getting secondhand accounts from other

Flott -- I -- 46

people; I didn't spend much time with them anyway. But there's no doubt about it, Lou Conein was with the coup leaders and giving the embassy excellent blow-by-blow accounts of what was going on, timely and accurate.

But the embassy had good reporting, too, of junior officers in the political section who'd been caught out by all the various fire fights going on, and the movement of troops and all, and would call in saying, "On such-and-such street crossing, and the following is going on: three APCs [armored personnel carriers] going this way," and so we had a pretty good feel for what was going on in town.

Then there was a lot of practically bombs-bursting-in-air stuff, because the palace was brought under fire by some, I believe, 105s, and maybe 155s, from about six or eight miles away, out toward Bien Hoa or something, and the Vietnamese were good artillerymen, just as the French were traditionally good artillerymen. They'd learned that, and they were lobbing shells right into the palace there, practically on the front doorstep. We were watching that from the roofs of the embassy, and sometimes there would be a lot of shooting and a lot of fireworks. And I stayed up more or less all night doing that.

One time in the middle of the night, another officer, Jim Rosenthal, who's presently our ambassador in Conakry, and I got into his little Volkswagen bug, and we drove about four blocks out from where the embassy was, and got to a square where there was an ARVN tank, and it turned its turret around and pointed the gun right at our car, and we decided we'd better get out of there. So we, with slow, deliberate speed, moved out.

Flott -- I -- 47

Then the first thing the next morning, I forget even who I went with, but some other guy wanted to go over and have a quick look at the palace the minute the cease-fire went into effect. I went, and I thought if I ever had to justify why I did it, I had a good excuse, which was that because I was known at the palace and the guards were used to seeing me and all that, and if there were some kind of situation where one side or the other were going to start shooting their prisoners in the back of the neck or something, with luck I could perhaps have talked them out of it. I wouldn't want my own fate to depend on that, but with luck and right timing I could have perhaps done something useful. So I thought I'd go in for that, and of course I was curious just to see what it was like.

I walked in one minute after the cease-fire, with the first wave of Vietnamese marines who entered the place once the firing had stopped. I thought I was pretty early in the process, when I looked up and coming down the marble staircase from above was *New York Times* correspondent David Halberstam, carrying an ivory tusk about ten feet long that he was hauling out. And I contented myself with picking up some M-16 ammo from the floor that Lou Conein needed, I thought he needed for his gun. And besides, it was U.S. government property anyway. And I did take a couple of souvenir ashtrays, which I still have.

G: Where is the best account of the coup?

F: Oh, and incidentally, one other thing at the palace: while walking into the palace up the steps to get up to the second floor, I also saw the body of the first man I ever saw who was shot in the head with the M-16 rifle, and it looked just like a tomato that somebody had stepped on.

Flott -- I -- 48

He was being hauled downstairs at the time. And there were soldiers doing a little bit of looting, but there was also some semblance of discipline. They'd looted a real good Austrian hunting rifle, a high-priced type Mannlicher, and somebody offered to buy it from the soldier. He said, "No, we can't sell weapons." Somebody grabbed a bottle of wine and I think the guidelines were if you tried to buy it, they'd say no. If you said, "I want to drink it right here with you," they'd say, "Well, since you insist," and they'd drink it. But it was pretty well-disciplined.

G: You said these were marines, primarily?

F: I remember marines being there, but there were various units.

G: [Nguyen Van] Thieu's troops were there, were they not, also?

F: Probably. I don't remember the order of the battle exactly, but I thought there were. I do remember about an hour later--well, I'll give you the whole personal chronology. Five minutes later, walking back to the embassy from the palace, which was close by, we came to one building which was pretty well shot up. It was, say, on the periphery of the palace, where there had been some shoot-'em-up, and there was a totally burned out APC, M-113. It must have had about six jerrycans of gasoline on the back, and got a tracer in it or something, and everybody in it was just completely incinerated. And I remember walking around the outside. It blew up, I guess, and was partly blown open, and probably a lot of people were burned inside. But I was walking around sort of looking at what had gone on, and I remember hearing a priest with a very Irish brogue, behind me, saying, "Watch where you're going, mister, you're walking on human remains." Very sternly, he was saying [it]. He meant

Flott -- I -- 49

business, and he was right. I just didn't realize it, but there were small fragments of human remains on the ground and I was walking over them, with no disrespect intended. I just hadn't even noticed them. You know, pretty well burned, but not completely powder.

I went back to the embassy, saw Lodge--

G: What was his reaction to all this?

F: Shock at the fact that Diem and Nhu had been killed in the way that we had just learned they had been, and certainly no gloating over it. Just shock that this man who had done so much for his country for so long a time had been killed, and especially in that manner, as part of the succession process. I told him I'd picked up a couple of ashtrays from the conference room in the palace where he and I had worked so many times before. I asked him if he wanted an ashtray. He definitely did not. He said, "Well, Fred, my trip to Washington is clearly off now," his planned departure on that plane on which I was going to have a ride. He said, "I've released the plane; it's going to wheels-up in two hours. If you want to fly back to Washington, you are certainly free to go on it. I've given you leave, and you can take it if you want." And I said, "Well, I appreciate that very much." He said, "This thing is all over. It's over." Well, I said, "Are you sure you can spare me and there's nothing you want me to do here now?" because it wasn't a good time for me to be leaving. And he said, "No. It's all over. It's all over; it's finished. Go back and see your mother and get a hop back here as quickly as you can." I said, "Okay. I certainly appreciate that, and I'll do so."

Just at that time, there was a sustained burst of small-arms fire. Some machine gun, some rifle; clearly there were several participants.

Flott -- I -- 50

And I said--you know, I was very close to his sons and all, and they had asked me to look after their parents, and I said, "Mr. Ambassador, I just can't quite be sure that this thing is over yet. It doesn't sound--who knows what's going to happen next. I think I'd probably better stay around." He said, "Well, my boy, that's your decision to make. Do as you wish," and he brushed it off. And so I said, "Yes, I'll do that." He said, "Well, go home, get a night's sleep." This was about ten in the morning.

So I went home and went to bed, not having had any sleep that night. And as you might imagine, woke up in about one hour, unable to get back to sleep. And then I began to think, and I began to kick myself for not having gone back to Washington. I thought, "Good God. I would have seen Bob Kennedy; I would have renewed my contact with him, and everybody would have been picking my brains and I would have been the first guy back from Saigon after the coup. How crazy can you be? I really zipped when I should have zagged."

So I went back to the embassy; there was no reason to hang around my apartment with insomnia. So I went back to the embassy to see what was going on and get up to speed on what all had happened, and when and how and where do we go from here. So I was there about five in the afternoon, just at dusk, and Lodge came into my office and said, "How are you feeling, Fred? Did you get some sleep?" I said, "Well, I have the most awful feeling that I've made a big mistake. I should have taken you up on it when you said go back to Washington. But now nothing's happening here, and I should have gone out on that plane. We could have done some useful work in Washington and I would have seen my mother." He

Flott -- I -- 51

said, "Well, my boy, don't come to me with your problems. I've got enough problems of my own," and very breezily went out of the office. He said, "Why don't you come and have supper tonight with Emily and me, and we'll talk about all this," because I was no longer living at the residence; I had my own little apartment nearby.

So I went there, and had dinner with the Lodges. We just talked about things and what was going on. The next morning, I went into the office, and about five o'clock in the afternoon, the day after I'd missed my plane, Lodge and Mike Dunn came in my office saying they had a mission: they wanted me to fly back to the States. It was a totally different airplane; the big bird from the White House, the KC-135, had left, but the following had happened, Lodge explained. This shows how he operated and also shows how he doesn't draw a picture of something he wants you to do; he doesn't even admit that he would want you to understand what he wanted you to do. He said, "Look, the following has happened. Madame Nhu"--was in Los Angeles with her eldest daughter, Le Thuy. Her two sons, who were younger, and one baby daughter had been up in Dalat. And the people who were responsible for protecting them in Dalat had sort of hid them out in the woods nearby for a day or so, and then brought them down to Saigon. Lodge said, "I prevailed upon the generals to get these children back to their mother. And what I want you to do is, one hour from now--you've got an hour to pack and get out to Tan Son Nhut. The children are out there. We've got General Harkins' C-54, which will fly you to Bangkok, and then I want you to fly commercial with them to Rome, and turn them over to Archbishop [Ngo Dinh] Thuc, the brother of Diem," and he gave me a couple of other errands to do. It was

Flott -- I -- 52

the time of the ecumenical conference at the Vatican, and whoever the archbishop of Boston, or cardinal--was it [Francis Cardinal] Spellman, or--?

G: [Richard Cardinal] Cushing?

F: Cushing, maybe it was. He said he was there. And he said, "When you're in Rome, after you've given your press conference and explained the situation here"--without telling me what to say, of course--"call on Cardinal Cushing, give him my respects, and tell him that I asked you to stop in to see him and brief him on the situation." Well, there Lodge is, a good politician who didn't want to be misrepresented by possible detractors as a man who'd got a couple of Catholic statesmen assassinated, and he figured he might as well set the record straight with Cardinal Cushing in Rome. And he said, "Explain to him what the new junta's like."

So I got out to the airport, pitch dark, curfew, and the driver I had had difficulty finding it. I probably wasn't much help, because I wasn't used to driving around myself at blacked-out airports. Got out to a special military hangar and got on this C-54, and there were the Nhu children. The CIA station chief had designated one embassy wife who was a nurse to ride with us as far as Bangkok on General Harkins' C-54, and I had the option of taking her all the way to Rome if I had wanted her help with the children. But she was working part-time as a secretary in their station, I think. So when we got to Bangkok, this lady would have been glad to go on to Rome, but I said, "Look, I really don't need any help, the way this thing's handled now. Mission accomplished; go back to your post." Which she did, and took it in good spirits. It was the only decision to make.

Flott -- I -- 53

Anyway, we got on the plane, and there was the eldest son of Nhu, who looked just like him, who was a kid, say, of eleven or twelve. Then there was his younger brother and the baby sister, and they all had, of course, different levels of awareness. And they'd been hiding out in the jungle for about a day or so, just as the first precaution that the people with them took, and once they saw that the coup was successful--they were just army officers who happened to be detailed to protecting the family up in Dalat, so they brought the kids in and reported in to the generals. And Lodge did make the pitch, "I want to rejoin those kids with their mother in Rome." Well, of course the consequence of that was hopefully it would draw the mother out of Los Angeles, which, as you've seen from the telegrams, there was some desire to do.

So we flew immediately to Bangkok, two hours by prop, or so, hardly had time to talk to anybody, just collecting my wits, and looking at what I had in my musette bag, and we got there. There arrangements had been made. They had a public health officer who gave the kids a quickie physical, made sure they had no fever, gave them the usual antimalarial prophylaxis and all that stuff. And they were in perfectly good shape.

We'd rushed out of the C-54 and were just about to load them on the Pan Am commercial jet going on the milk run Pan Am route that stopped everywhere, Bangkok, Rangoon, Calcutta, Delhi, Karachi, finally getting to Rome. Again, the Pan Am station manager was very cooperative and handled it very well, and the Bangkok embassy was supportive, and all the right players were there and did all the right things to get the kids on their way with minimum trauma. They did put us all in first class, four of us had seats in first class, and the younger brother, the nine-year-

Flott -- I -- 54

old kid, sat with the baby sister and I sat with the eleven- or twelve-year-old, who was--they were all bilingual in French, except the baby, and the twelve-year-old kid I really had a lot of respect for, because he rose to the occasion very well. He wasn't crying, sort of an Asian outward passivity or composure on the thing. And once we got rolling, our main concern was for nobody to notice them, and I didn't get off the plane until we got to Rome and they didn't either.

And I remember with the elder son of Nhu, reading the paper, and there was already an English-language paper in Bangkok that somebody had picked up, maybe in India, with accounts of the coup. And the kid read the account of the condition in which his father and his uncle had been found in the back of this armored personnel carrier, with their heads squashed by rifle butts, and all kinds of bayonet wounds in them and everything else, all cut up, and their heads squashed. And he was reading this with complete calm. He read English quite well, although we talked in French. But he didn't understand the word "squashed," so he said to me in French, "What's the word for squashed?" I said, "Écrabouillée." I said, "It means squashed, but you don't want to pay too much attention to the details, because the reporters probably didn't even see it, and it's the way they write their things." And he took it very calmly, went on and talked and eventually I got them to Rome, having avoided the press and the public along the way.

Archbishop Thuc met us there, at planeside. He was very hostile, because he knew I was sent by Cabot Lodge to accompany the children. There were about a hundred and fifty Italian newsmen there and other press people. I went up to the Archbishop to pay my respects, pay my

Flott -- I -- 55

condolences, and tell him I'd been asked by Ambassador Lodge to deliver the children to him, so they could rejoin their mother, so their mother could rejoin them. He wouldn't speak to me, wouldn't shake hands, nothing. Total distance, total ice treatment. Packed them into the car, not a word of thanks, nothing. No attempt at courtesy to the crew of the Pan Am plane. I had told the captain of the aircraft what our trip was about. He probably knew from his channels, anyway. And we had protected these kids from all possible trauma; there had been no scene, nobody came up and talked to them during the whole trip. But not a word of thanks to Lodge, to me, to Pan Am, or anybody. Archbishop Thuc packed them into a big limousine he had and tore off.

Well, then the press of course wanted to talk to me. I was very glad to answer their questions. They said, "Are you the Scarlet Pimpernel? Have you saved these children's lives?" I said, "No, not at all. The children were in no jeopardy at all. Their guardians took understandable immediate security measures the minute the coup started, but the officers who were charged with their safety in Dalat knew that the officers who were behind the coup were responsible officers like themselves, and they quickly turned the children over to them. Ambassador Lodge suggested to the coup leaders that the children should be allowed to rejoin their mother, and the generals in the coup, responding to the same humanitarian concerns themselves, said 'Why not?' And simply because I'm one of Lodge's staff, he asked me to accompany the children here to make sure they didn't have any problems along the way. But there's no Scarlet Pimpernel; they were in no danger in Saigon, either." And I answered questions in that vein. Well, of course, Madame

Flott -- I -- 56

Nhu hated my guts for that. She hated my guts for working for Cabot Lodge, for that matter.

G: There was no love lost between the Nhuses and Lodge.

F: I got there, if I'm not mistaken, about on a Tuesday, in Rome. We thought Madame Nhu was coming, but I waited around until Friday, and she hadn't come. She just wasn't leaving Los Angeles. But she, in the meantime, continued her tirades, saying that Lodge was a monster with blood dripping from his hands, who had arranged the murder of her husband. And I was explaining to all the press, and it got quoted in the *New York Times* and everything else, that this was a Vietnamese coup, that the generals were certainly not ogres; they thought they could run the war effort better than Diem and Nhu, that they seemed to be taking things pretty well in hand, and we were optimistic about the outcome, and that Lodge's only concern was a purely humanitarian one of getting the children back to their mother. And having it emerge, "Well, why doesn't the mother come to the children?" And I said, "Well, we did the best thing. Pending her return, they are in the hands of their uncle the Archbishop, which is fine."

Then finally after waiting four days, because of my instructions, if you can call them that, I left. I had been told by Lodge to go and do whatever is necessary and proper. The way I interpreted my mission, I would have waited a few days for Madame Nhu, to pay his condolences, to touch whatever bases could be touched, not with any illusions about it being well received, but just to extend the courtesy I'd wait three days. She didn't come back, so I eventually went back to the States and joined Lodge there.

Flott -- I -- 57

I flew first to Boston and stayed overnight with his two sons and their wives, and had a good talk with them. That was mid-November. Later, George Lodge had a business appointment in Washington, so we flew down together on the shuttle. I'd arrived without any overcoat or anything, and his wife gave me an old overcoat that George had had in prep school. Since George is six feet six, it was about six inches too long for me; it fit like a tent. But I took it; I was glad to have a coat in Washington in November. We got down to Washington about noon.

I went over to the State Department and just on the way up in the elevator, somebody who'd heard of the assassination told the tragic news. I remember there was a secretary standing next to me in the elevator, and a girl friend of hers who'd just heard the television told her that Kennedy had been shot and dead, and this girl let out a loud scream of grief. So I walked into Bill Sullivan's office, and he was watching the TV and getting the word that President Kennedy was indeed dead. I tried to engage Bill Sullivan in a serious discussion of the situation in Saigon, but he was so sickened by the loss of President Kennedy he said, "Fred, this afternoon I'm afraid I really can't talk shop very well." So I had nobody to talk to.

The next day I gave Joe Alsop a call, because I'd had a lot to do with Joe Alsop in Saigon. He was sometimes a house guest at the Lodge residence when I was living there. When Joe came to be house guest, Mike Dunn and I would double up in one of our rooms and Joe would take the other one. So I called Joe on Saturday morning, and he was a good newspaperman, figuring well, the world goes on. So he said, "Well, I suppose we shouldn't do this, but why don't you come over and have lunch and have a talk?" So I went over to his house in Georgetown and had a talk.

Flott -- I -- 58

But another interesting vignette from that period was: I stayed in Washington while Lodge was there, and he was going back just the opposite way I was. I'd come from Rome and was going back to Saigon through the Far East, partly to buy some furniture in Hong Kong for my house and all, and I also had things to do in Japan, and I was making my way back that way. Lodge was going through Europe. So we were together a few days in Washington, then went our respective ways.

I got out to Chicago to see my mother, and went into a friend's office, who was a businessman on La Salle Street, and asked if I could use his typewriter, because I wanted to send a letter of condolence to Bob Kennedy. So whatever day Kennedy was killed, it was about five days later. You can imagine all the things going on in Washington in the life of the Kennedys. I wrote a letter of condolences to Bob Kennedy, and mailed it. In Saigon about eight days later I had an answer from him, in his own handwriting, which you can't mistake; it's a very small scroll in black ink, and a copy of the mass card and all that. Just a few words acknowledging my condolences. "Many thanks, Fred, for your condolences. By the way, keep your head down and watch out for yourself over there." And this got to me about eight days after I'd mailed my letter in Chicago. Of course, the APO [Army and Air Force Post Office] to Saigon was fabulous, but it just shows how well organized the Kennedys were. Obviously their staff had screened tons of mail; they thought, "Well, this one sounds like someone who knew Bob, and who had met the President"--because I'd met with him. Lodge took me in with him to the Oval Office to meet President Kennedy when Lodge finally took leave of him, going out to Saigon in August, because I was supposed to be a possible

Flott -- I -- 59

liaison channel, or as a legman-courier, basically. And Lodge wanted me to meet President Kennedy and he wanted it known to the White House staff that he brought me in to wire me in with the President, too. I had met the President before, with Bob, after our trip to Russia, and he knew I was Bob's interpreter going through the Soviet Union. And President Kennedy--this was in early August of 1963--looked me up and down in mock shock, said, "Hey, you were with my brother [in Russia]. What are you doing coming in as the chosen instrument of a Republican who picked you because he trusts you? What's going on here that I don't know about?" or words to that effect. He made a little joke out of that. And again, pat on the back and kick in the tail, and good wishes, the best possible way.

So in late November we went back to Saigon and started seeing how the country was going to be governed by the MCR, whether the Military Council--

G: Oh, gosh, I can't--

F: The CMR, the *Conseil Militaire de la Revolution*.

G: Revolutionary Military Council.

F: Yes, whatever. And then I started meeting a whole new set of players, and seeing more of different people, and this goes on. If you have a thought or a question--

G: No, no. I was just going to ask if the changed situation in Saigon put new requirements on you.

F: Yes. It was, well, a number of things. All such things as dealing with the Vietnamese third force, dealing with émigrés, flying back and forth to say what we were up to and all; that was clearly not needed now. To some extent it would have been overtaken even in the normal course of

Flott -- I -- 60

events, but it was all the more overtaken because of the coup and the new government, so I concentrated on other things.

I must say, further to these memories of the coup--I mentioned how after the coup I went home, had insomnia, thought I'd zipped when I should have zagged by not flying back to Washington at once. So I went back to the office about five in the afternoon and started reading telegrams. This concerns the French embassy, and I'll get back to how I was dealing with them, but the French embassy was pretty much cut off from information about the coup. Because after all, they were rightly or wrongly regarded as closer to Diem somehow, and the presumption was that they were well wired in. But immediately after the coup the French just didn't know who was in the new government, etc. at that time, that particular day after the coup. And the French chargé, who had been told by Cabot Lodge that he could do this when he had an emergency, came over to the embassy, called on me, and said, "Look, I just don't know what in hell is going on. We hear all kinds of rumors, but do you know anything?" And I said, "Yes, we're pretty well informed."

We had a pile of telegrams--it was literally a foot high--of reports to Washington that had been going out every five minutes or so, and they were all of low security classification, unclassified or restricted, maybe. Almost press bulletins, announcements, etc. All stuff that--for one thing, was all overtaken by events, it was by any common-sense criteria no longer secret, but it was a blow-by-blow description of everything that had happened, in the public record, in the past two days, plus a lot of Foreign Broadcast Information Service,

Flott -- I -- 61

everybody's monitoring of everything. These were my copies; I routinely got individual copies of all the traffic.

This French chargé d'affaires came in, and he wanted to have sort of a collegial *cher-collègue, tour d'horizon*, discussing who was on what base and what was going on and what did we think of all this. And I discussed it with him and answered all his questions; he really was in the dark that day. He claimed all his sources were out of touch, which I'm sure they were, while they were waiting for things to be clarified. I said, "You know, I've told you as much as I have time to discuss, but I have here a pile of telegrams which I'm not going to be reading tonight. If you want to borrow them, I'm afraid I have to ask to have them back, because I may need the copies. But you're welcome"--this was, say, at two in the afternoon--"you're welcome to take them home with you and peruse them, and then try to bring them back for me sometime tomorrow, if you can." He was very grateful, because the French, who were temporarily completely cut out from everything, were thus enabled able to know what was happening. What I was doing was essentially on instructions from Cabot Lodge. So I gave him all this stuff, and he brought it back the next day, with his visiting card and with the note, "*Avec mes très vifs remerciements personnels*," "With my very warm personal thanks." It was one of the more useful things that I did, because it made him look good in Paris; it didn't cost us anything. His name was Georges Perruche, P-E-R-R-U-C-H-E, and he died about six or eight months ago. He later became the French ambassador in Mongolia and Kabul. He did many things to repay the favor in the years that followed, and was a good and wise colleague indeed.

Flott -- I -- 62

The background of the relation with Perruche was that when we first arrived in Saigon, when I was living in Lodge's residence, everybody had tales to tell, horror stories to tell, about the French, accusing them of all sorts of things. One French military attaché remarked to me that the French were really in a difficult position, "Because if the Viet Cong fight well, they (those who blame the French for everything) claim they're getting French advisers, and when the ARVN fights poorly, they say it's because they were French-trained. Logically, they can't have it both ways!"

(Laughter)

But the French were blamed for being in cahoots with the Viet Cong and all that, and there were all sorts of lower-level French types in Saigon, who thought the sinister Americans were really there to take their place. I didn't see many Americans who wanted to stay there and rival some Corsican over who was going to be in charge of a small restaurant or something. And there'd be complaints about noise from American generators and complaints about MACV trucks and everything else.

I was still living at the residence, and one Saturday, when we weren't too busy--this was about two weeks after we got there--the French chargé's wife was absent from country at the time, but Lodge invited him over to lunch. And of course he was delighted to come. It was just Cabot Lodge, Mrs. Lodge, and myself, and of course the French guest. The fact that both Lodges spoke excellent French helped set the stage. And Lodge said, "Now, look. As you see, Fred is very close to me; he's a friend, he lives in the house with us, and all. I want you to know that I am pro-France. I know Fred is very pro-France. Now, that doesn't mean

Flott -- I -- 63

I agree necessarily with everything General de Gaulle would say. I don't like some things General de Gaulle has done. Perhaps you do; perhaps you don't. In any case, you can't say, and I can't say.

"However, I would like to, as much as we can, avoid any unnecessary damage to longer-term Franco-American relations because of the situations in which we both find ourselves here in Saigon. So I have asked Fred to sort of honcho the French business, and if ever any French person has any complaint about anything the American military are doing, the American civilians are doing, commercial people, anything, they go to him with it and he will refer it to the proper authorities within the country team. And by the same token, if you ever have to see me--as you might imagine, I'm very busy: try to solve most of your problems with the American embassy directly through Fred, but if ever you feel that you absolutely have to talk to me for something--I can imagine how some cases might arise--then he is well situated to get you in to see me, and my instructions to him are to do so." So Perruche was delighted at that, and that was why he felt it was not out of bounds for him to come to me and say, "What do you know about this?" and, "Please fill me in." We had a very good working relation, thanks to Lodge's initiative and to Perruche's reception of it.

As a result of my ties to the French, really, because I was handling that French account, months later, when the American Embassy got blown up on March 31 of 1965, I guess it was, I happened to be out of my office. That day I was going out to visit a French plantation; it was up-country, well behind the Viet Cong lines, to whatever extent anyone had lines, and the deal was that these French plantation types were going

Flott -- I -- 64

to be there--the European Frenchmen who were there--would know who I was. Well, they'd know I was an American who spoke French and was a friend of theirs. The Vietnamese employees would not know that I was anything other than a Frenchman from the company headquarters in Paris, who was visiting in Vietnam and for whom a luncheon was to be given.

So I went out from Saigon on a French airplane, an old bucket of bolts, a single-engine biplane, one of those puddle jumpers the plantations had. The pilot who flew it--about nine o'clock in the morning--had such shakes or DTs that he couldn't get the ignition key into the switch. So he took out his flask of whiskey, had a shot of whiskey to pull his nerves together a little, then put in the key. We flew first to one place where we visited one plantation, then we went over to the one where they were having this luncheon.

While we were there, we first got the word over their plantation wireless that there'd been an incident in Saigon. "*On a plastique l'Ambassade des Etats-Unis.*" *Plastique* can mean anything; it can mean one set off a light explosive, or made a racket, or set off a big fire-cracker, or small explosion--at the American Embassy. We sort of laughed a bit, and they said, "Well, everybody's going to blame it on the French, and they'll blame it on you, and they'll say a day was picked when you weren't there. And that'll prove you're guilty and that your sinister French contacts have done this." We sort of joked about that, not yet knowing how serious it was, and then we had a good lunch. One of the officers of the plantation who'd been in the Foreign Legion mentioned that there was an old Foreign Legion mess hall nearby--left from the 1954 war, and we went over to look at it and read the graffiti and all, and

Flott -- I -- 65

came back for a siesta in a little air-conditioned bedroom. I had a nice siesta, for about half an hour. When I got up from that they said, "Look, we've got bad news. This embassy thing sounds as though it's pretty serious. It was quite a big bomb and all, and apparently some people were killed and injured." I said, "Well, look,"--I had planned to spend the weekend with them--"in that case, I better ask you to fly me back to Saigon." So I got back to Saigon an hour later.

G: In that same airplane?

F: Yes. And got in to the embassy, and went into my office, and I had a big leather upholstered chair in my room where I usually sat; at my desk there was a big leather chair. The windows were all blown out and there were three big chunks of plate glass about a foot and a half by a foot and a half stuck right in the chair where I would have been. Or more likely, when the embassy got blown up, like everybody else, I would have rushed to the windows, and there I would have got a whole face full of glass. It just shows that sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you aren't. That's all for the moment.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

FREDERICK W. FLOTT


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, Frederick W. Flott 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 recordings and transcripts of personal interviews conducted on July 22, July 24, and September 27, 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 transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.
- (4) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.


Donor

Date January 2, 1991


Archivist of the United States

Date March 15, 1991