

INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 3, 1969
INTERVIEWEE: MICHAEL FORRESTAL
INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN
PLACE: Mr. Forrestal's office, Shearman and Sterling, 53 Wall Street,
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M: You're Michael Forrestal. You were a Far Eastern expert with the National Security [Council] staff, the [McGeorge] Bundy shop, in the White House up until, you said, April of 1964. Then you went to the State Department. What was your title there exactly?

F: I went to the State Department as special assistant to the Secretary of State for Vietnamese Affairs and chairman of the Intergovernmental Coordinating Committee on Vietnam.

M: That was in . . . ?

F: I think it was about April, 1964.

M: Right. Then you stayed there until March of 1965 when you left the government, and you haven't returned.

F: March 1, and I've never been back. Right.

M: Did you have any contact with Mr. Johnson prior to the time he became vice president, back in the fifties or any time earlier than that?

F: Yes. But it was entirely social. President Johnson was a great friend of my father's. During the Second World War, the very early part of it, he was briefly in the Navy. He went out on some missions, as I recall, to the Pacific. I think, at least he told me, that it

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was my father's idea that he do this. And during the course of the Second World War, he was one of the legislative leaders with whom my father had a quite intimate contact.

M: So he at least had enough to know who you were?

F: As a kid, yes, purely as a kid. Then I didn't see him very much really until President Kennedy came along, when he of course was vice president. I used to see him during those days; because one of my duties was to brief the Vice President on the situation in the Far East.

M: That's one of the questions I wanted to ask. You joined the Bundy staff when? At the beginning of the Kennedy Administration?

F: No, no. I didn't join it until almost a year later, January 1, 1962. I joined it ostensibly--you will recall, there was something that was called the Thanksgiving Day Massacre.

M: Yes. In 1961.

F: In 1961. I think it was largely as a result of some reshuffling of responsibilities in the area of foreign affairs that President Kennedy asked me to come down. He needed just more bodies, I think basically, and I had known him very slightly before. I was one of the men that he asked to come down to help him at that time.

M: And one of your duties was that you were the liaison man from the Bundy shop to the Vice President? Is that right?

F: Yes. The way the President put it, my original, basic job, President Kennedy had told me the first day I was in office. I had asked him what I was supposed to do, and his answer was, "Well, I really want

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you to be my ambassador to that separate sovereignty known as Averell Harriman."

M: That's a formidable task. (Laughter)

F: I think he really meant that. I had had no background whatsoever in the Far East, or at least minimal background in the Far East. I had a considerable background in European area, having been with the Marshall Plan for three years, but none in the Far East. Well, as the job developed, what I really did was I had two functions. One was to dredge up information from within the government departments, the great departments, in the area of Far Eastern policy, military, political, and economic. But the other half of the function was to go out from the White House and do two things. One, to brief people as best one could. This would include to some extent, the Congress, [and] the Vice President particularly, because President Kennedy was insistent that the Vice President be kept informed, having remembered the previous administration. And very, very occasionally, [I would brief] the members of the public. And the other half of that sort of outgoing function was to ensure [that] the decisions that were taken at the President's level were carried out by the various departments of the government.

M: Are you implying that Mr. Johnson was not a participant in the policy-making function during that time, but simply was being informed?

F: He sometimes was. It varied very much on the question, and I think to some extent it varied in relation to his own interest. In my area, the Vice President got intensely interested only twice, as I recall.

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Once was on the question of the disengagement from the Laotian war in 1961, when I wasn't there, but then in 1962 when the disengagement became more difficult. The second period of intense interest on his part was the Diem business, the difficulties we had in 1963. I think those were the two major occasions. Normally, I don't think he ever really asserted himself, but he had ways of letting it be known that he was interested in certain areas.

M: Did he attend important meetings usually?

F: In these two cases, yes, he attended them all. He never said very much. Well, that's not true. On one or two occasions, he did say a good deal.

M: I've had people tell me that they thought that he rendered a lot of advice on many things, foreign affairs included, to the President in private. Did he? Did you have an occasion to know whether he did or not, really?

F: Yes. Yes, I think I do. On the question of Laos and on the question of Diem, these two ones, I think the way his interest expressed itself was that he must have gone to the President. I'm trying to be sure that I remember whether President Kennedy actually said, "I've had a conversation with Lyndon, and he's angry about this or wants to do that." I can't say honestly I remember him putting it that way, but I can certainly remember Bundy's feeling and once or twice the President saying, "You better get over and talk to the Vice President. He has strong feelings in this area and he needs more information. He wants to be consulted." At least twice that happened, and I suspect

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without knowing that in other areas of the world where he had more of a concern perhaps he would do it more often. But I can at least testify to two very definite occasions.

M: We'll come back to that.

Did you play any part in his trip to Vietnam while he was vice president?

F: No. I think that occurred before I got down there.

M: It was in 1961, but I thought you might have gotten involved in some way. You did not?

F: No.

M: How would you estimate the nature of the commitment to Vietnam at the time of President Kennedy's assassination? Was it different than it later became, or was it one that was just assumed and continued pretty much unchanged, as far as you could see it?

F: No. You put your finger on the most critical time. Beginning May 8, 1963 which was, I think, one of the temple episodes at Hue right through until the twenty-second of November, my recollection is that the government was beginning to go through some very painful periods of wondering whether the whole escapade was going to work at all.

Some people, including [Roger] Hilsman and myself, and I guess most of the people that concerned themselves with Southeast Asia were anxious that the effort be made to succeed. We thought it could succeed. We had disagreements about how it should be done with various other departments.

M: Tactical?

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F: Tactical. But basically I have the feeling that we began to lose our presidential support in the summer of 1963. It was nothing that one can point to definitely, but President Kennedy had not paid a great deal of attention to this except sporadically. He would demand reports, or send people out and bring them back and talk to them. But during the Buddhist problems, he was forced to pay more attention and my recollection is that he was starting to get very doubtful or at least he was beginning to ask some questions that people on his staff thought we had satisfactorily explained to him and answered long before.

M: He's asking them again?

F: He's asking them again, and he's asking them in a rougher way. It would be much too much to say that he had reached any decision to change anything. But I don't think it would be too much to say that he was beginning to resist his staff's insistence, and the State Department's insistence, and the Defense Department's insistence on increasing the effort. He was beginning to dig in his heels.

The only specific thing that I can say is that on the twentieth or the twenty-first of November, because this is something that naturally one remembers major things like that better than others, he called me into his office to ask me to go to Cambodia. We were having terrible troubles with [Norodom] Sihanouk at that time, and I'd gone out on several occasions trying to keep Sihanouk calm and less offensive than he was wont to be. In the course of his telling me what I was supposed to do in Cambodia, he said, "When you get back and after the first of the year, we've got to sit down and do a rather

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more careful job than we have in the past in assessing what the role of the United States really is in Southeast Asia." He suggested that although he wouldn't want to do anything drastic until after the election, of 1964, nevertheless, we ought to get our guns in a row and get prepared for whatever it was that the government under his guidance decided to do about Vietnam. That's as far as he ever went. There was no suggestion that he wanted to drop it or to radically change anything, but there was certainly a suggestion that he was getting very nervous about it.

M: You and Hilsman were out there at the beginning of that year, and your report suggested I suppose among other things that things were better than they had been. Did they degenerate then rapidly or were you all misled in some way by the people on the spot as to what the real nature of the situation was in early 1963?

F: I just think the fact of the matter is we were wrong. We were wrong in our [report]. We may have been misled, but that was our own damn fault if we were.

In the fall of 1962 and the spring of 1963, after a series of trips, one of which I went out on with Hilsman, I and I think Roger too were both convinced that the effort in South Vietnam could be made successful and was indeed showing signs of being successful. I think it was in 1963 in the spring that we came back with a report, which Hilsman quotes from in his book, that is basically optimistic. It has some caveats in it, but it was basically optimistic. We thought that by continued application of the proper strategy, the

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proper tactics, sooner or later the [Ngo Dinh] Diem government would find its feet, would be able to carry on alone, that there would be a decline of assistance rather than an increase. In general, we thought things were looking pretty good.

Our mistake was that we made a bad estimate of two things. First, we badly underestimated the capacity of the guerrillas, the Viet Cong, politically to organize their own side of the war. We overestimated the capability of the city-bred people who run the government of South Vietnam to carry on an effective counter-guerrilla campaign. And I suppose, worst of all, the worst mistake and the one which there's least defense to, is that we vastly overestimated the United States' ability as a government, as a machine, to handle the affairs of a small country twelve thousand miles away.

M: I was thinking in terms of the [Governor George] Romney brainwashing business. You don't think there was any intentional effort on the part of the Americans particularly to prevent the White House visitors or the Defense Department visitors or what have you from understanding what was going on.

F: Absolutely none whatsoever. What there was, of course--it's like talking to the quarterback of a football team in the middle of a game. I mean, they were optimistic. They had to be. They also had a tendency to select those facts which would be most favorable to their cause and to the thought that it was winning. But I don't think anybody including Mr. Romney could blame anybody for brainwashing him. I mean, after all, it's the duty of the fellow that comes out

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to prevent that from happening. No. There wasn't. And furthermore, this is particularly true of anybody coming out of the White House. After all, you have a certain amount of clout. You don't have to accept what they tell you. You can insist. If you have the energy, you can just go out into the countryside yourself and hire an interpreter and tromp around. So, no, I don't think there was. They may only have been brainwashing in the sense that the people were lazy, but not otherwise.

M: Let's move to that August beginning of the final days or months of Diem and Mr. Johnson's interest in that. Does that begin with the events surrounding the August-24 telegram that Mr. Hilsman writes so much about in his book?

F: No. I think it really began before that with Mr. Johnson. I think Roger remembers that telegram because it was such a painful experience for him.

M: Yes.

F: It actually was not as important as he makes it sound. What happened I think was: between May and the middle of July, a series of things had begun happening in South Vietnam which caused a number of the so-called experts, principally the American newspaper community out there led by various correspondents whom you know, plus some of our own government people, particularly the civilians, to begin to get extremely worried about the capability or the survivability really of President Diem. What had happened really, I think, was that Diem had been governing for almost ten years. He was getting tired. He

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had a brother who was, to say the least, difficult, who was giving him a lot of bad advice. And he was beginning to retire a good deal from the public scene in Saigon. He was also beginning, partly because of his isolation and retirement, to start attacking for political reasons, some of which may have been very valid, certain elements in Vietnam whose support he badly needed in order to govern. And as those elements began to counterattack him, he found himself forced or convinced to use some pretty harsh methods against them. The harsher the methods he used, the more the reaction was, and so forth and so on.

Well, during this time, Vice President Johnson I'm sure had not paid any attention, less probably even than President Kennedy, to what was really happening out there. He had a personal interest in Diem. He had visited him in 1961. He said some very complimentary things about him in 1961. I believe they got along well together. The two men, given the differences in their backgrounds, nevertheless had a certain rapport. And it's understandable that he would have admired Diem, because even by 1961, Diem convinced Hilsman and myself, even a year later, that he was a pretty great fellow. Everybody thought he was pretty good.

But when this unpleasantness began happening after May 8, the press began to attack Diem. A great many American officials began to think he was getting worse and worse. Some people, including myself, began to be worried lest he collapse, and then we have nothing to replace him with, or that nobody show up on the scene to carry on.

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It was at that time that President Johnson who knew the man began to get nervous--I think I'm almost quoting him right--that a lot of low level people and the press were starting to meddle and to intervene and express opinions about things they didn't understand. He expressed this worry once to President Kennedy. I'm almost certain he must have done it directly, because one of the results of it was I went over to see him--one of the rare times that I really had a long conversation with him--about the Diem problem. I think I must have gone over to see him in July before the so-called August telegram.

M: What did he want? Just some expressions of support that would prevent the undercutting by low level officials and the press?

F: He was very careful. He never said what he wanted in this kind of a briefing. He would only ask questions. He wanted to know, first of all, why the press was behaving in such a nonsensical way, by his lights. He wanted to know why some civilians, both in the State Department and in the AID Agency, were beginning to look as though they were no longer supporting our policy in Vietnam, and what was their problem, what had happened. He was anxious to know whether we had thought through what was going to happen if Diem did collapse. One of the statements he made in a larger meeting--it was very rare for him to say anything--he sort of wondered out loud; this is before Diem's death, "Shouldn't one be more frightened of the evil one knows than the evil one knows not of?"

M: Hard to believe he had been reading Hamlet.

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F: That's right.

M: Think he had?

F: No, I think he had it. I'm sure that I've misquoted it. No, he had these things every now and then.

M: Did he act as if he'd really sort of done his homework on Vietnam? When he asked these questions, did he?

F: No. No, he hadn't done homework in the sense that he didn't know the statistics. But, in my judgment, they weren't important anyway. What basically he had not been able to do that everybody else had been doing was to keep abreast of a rapidly changing situation. So he found himself behind the facts most of the time there. He was very concerned that because he didn't know all of the facts that there was sort of a conspiracy in the government against Diem. I think what he didn't understand, and it was difficult in the short time available that you had to talk to him to get it across to him, that the problem was not a bunch of low level newspaper reporters and civilians in our government trying to undercut Diem. The problem was that Diem was doing things in his own country that were hurting him very, very much. And it was hard to get the Vice President at that time to understand what it was that Diem was doing in Saigon that was causing a lot of this trouble. Basically, he was putting too many people in jail; that's what it really came down to.

M: Then, did he get actively involved in the reassessment that Hilsman talks about that went on after the August 24 wire? You mentioned one of the times he did talk a lot in a meeting. Is this one of them?

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F: Yes, it was. When you say actively involved, I don't know. Not on a day-to-day basis. But my recollection is that he began coming to State Department staff meetings, the Secretary's own staff meeting from time to time, whenever this subject was up. He said very little.. The only thing I could really remember his having said is the thing I've just quoted to you. As I say, he was exceedingly disciplined. He was very careful never to say anything that made it sound as if he was even giving an opinion that might affect President Kennedy's judgment. He held himself very much in check. I think the most I can say is that he just appeared occasionally. He clearly was interested in this. We had a little go around with him on Madame [Ngo Dinh] Nhu. You remember Madame Nhu?

M: Sure.

F: Well, one of the more amusing [incidents], it's a tiny footnote.

M: That's the kind we like.

F: Well, Madame Nhu had written a letter to President Johnson asking him to help her come to this country. This was in, I think, about July 1963.

M: The worst time.

F: The worst possible time. She'd been here before.

M: Yes.

F: She'd been here once before and she had done her little tour, but she wanted to come back. There was a lot of talk. President Johnson was not involved in these discussions, but there was a lot of consideration [of] should you or should you not have Madame Nhu come.

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On the one hand, there were those who would say, "This is a free country. We don't deny people the right to come here, and it would set a very bad precedent." There were others who said, "Well, goddamn it, we're in a mess nonetheless!"

M: "Not now!" (Laughter)

F: "The last thing we want to have is this woman coming around." Finally, I think it was decided--and I can't remember who made the decision--that she should not come. So Bundy asked me to go to see Vice President Johnson to discuss with him a reply. As I recall it, I drafted a reply for him, and I took it up to his office in the Executive Office Building to show it to him. He read it and he said something like, "Who wrote this?" I said, "I wrote it. I drafted it." He said, "In that case I suppose there's no point in me trying to change it, is there?" And I said, "Mr. Vice President, why, of course, you can change it any way you want." (Laughter) He read it again, and he said, "Well, I don't think it's a particularly charming letter that you've drafted." This was explaining to her why she couldn't come to the United States. But he said, "That's all right. Go show it to President Kennedy." So I took it over, and I found President Kennedy in the steam bath in the White House, and showed it to him. He read it through. Strangely enough, he had exactly the same reaction that Johnson had. He said, "This is not the kind of a letter that you write to a charming lady. It's got to be more gentle and more . . ." So he scribbled on it and redrafted it, put in some fulsome language at the end about how

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beautiful she was and how charming she was, and how much we wanted her to come at some other time.

M: Some other time. (Laughter)

F: That's right. And I trotted back to President Johnson, who looked at it and said, "Well, now, did you make these changes, Forrestal?" And I said, "No, sir." He said, "Well, I can guess who did." It's pretty good." (Laughter) "Pretty good. Type it up and I'll sign it."

M: That's the way it went.

F: That's the way it went.

M: During that several months when the situation was degenerating pretty rapidly in South Vietnam, was there active consideration of some type of military action to perhaps forestall further degeneration? Such as bombing, for example?

F: No, we were very bad about that in retrospect. No. Well, actually, I say we were very bad about it. The situation had not reached that point. If you'll recall in May just before the Buddhist problems in Hue, we were at what everybody thought was the high point, the high water mark, of our success in Vietnam. All the statistics looked good, we were supposed to control more of the countryside, and so forth and so on. When the Diem business started the worst that we contemplated happening was that there would be a terrible vacuum, a political vacuum. What we really thought would happen was that his brother would resign and he would continue. That was our first hope. That didn't work. Then we thought, well, maybe, they'll both

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take a leave of absence or sort of leave for a while, let things calm down. Well, that didn't work. We thought, well, maybe, he'll just abdicate and go away, and somebody else is going to have to be discovered to take over. It was obviously going to have to be a general, because they were the ones that have the power over there. And the nervousness was that running that government by a committee of generals looked poor from a political point of view. It didn't look as though they could get the support of their people, get sufficient support. So the real alternatives that were looked at was how do we exercise whatever influence we have which is not very much, or it wasn't then in that country, to keep a political vacuum from occurring. It never occurred, I don't think, to anybody that we were going to be faced with a military defeat in classic terms. It was going to be a nasty political mess for which we would be blamed in any event.

M: So it wasn't military contingencies that you were choosing from?

F: Really not. They didn't come up. There were some military contingencies in Laos, but not for Vietnam.

M: When President Johnson assumed the presidency in late November, was there anybody, to your knowledge, still in the White House, advising him to really go through a serious reconsideration and perhaps cut our losses and reverse the commitment to Vietnam?

F: Unfortunately again, in hindsight, no. There should have been, but there wasn't. First of all, I didn't get back until the end of December. The situation in the field in the beginning of 1964 was

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not bad, as I recall. The political situation had begun to deteriorate, and therefore, certain problems were beginning to show up in the countryside that were nervous-making. But I don't think anybody had the foresight to really see and certainly not to tell the President, whose interest was also on something else at the time, that he had to stop everything and think about reviewing [it]. In fact, if anything, all the motives went the other way. The whole feeling at the time was "My Gosh, we have a new president. It's going to take him time to find out what it's all about. Let's not propose anything new, really. Let's just try to keep the thing on an even keel until he's got time to sort things out, get control of his government." All of us felt, whether we liked him or not, that this man had the right to demand and get a pause in everything until he had a chance to pick his own people and pull his government together.

M: Did any individual or group of individuals seem to you to be particularly close as advisors on foreign policies his first couple of months or three months? Did anybody stand out as one he trusted?

F: In foreign affairs, no. Bundy was the nearest thing, I think, but Bundy didn't have in those early days anywhere near the relationship that he had with Kennedy, that any of us had had with Kennedy.

Well, putting it another way, if you wanted to get something done in the early days of President Johnson's Administration, and if you were on his White House staff and you couldn't get to see him yourself, which happened, then there were three men who were remarkably able. And although they had no expertise in foreign

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affairs, they were somehow able to communicate with the President in a way that no one else was: One was Walter Jenkins, who was just excellent at this. He worked like a dog. He was up all night long. You could talk to him for about five minutes and tell him what your problem was, and he'd somehow get the President to move on it. Jack Valenti, to a lesser extent. And bit by bit, finally when he came over permanently, Bill Moyers could do the same thing. I think all of them, in those early days, had more influence than Bundy or anybody like myself on his staff. Although, he talked to us a lot, the President did.

M: But he was hard to see?

F: He was hard to see, yes. He was hard to get at. Well, he just had a very different way of handling his staff than President Kennedy had. And of course we were not, all of us, his men, so he obviously relied more heavily on people he'd known in the past.

M: Were any basic decisions of importance made during the first two or three months on Vietnam or anything else, as far as that's concerned?

F: Not where I was concerned, which was the Far East as a whole. The only one that came anywhere near being important, and subsequent events proved it to be quite important, was Indonesia. We had a hang-up about Indonesia that was sort of a trap that had already occurred before Kennedy's death. Somebody in the Congress, I think it was [William S.] Broomfield, had gotten an amendment into the Foreign Aid Act which required that for any assistance--I think it

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was any assistance at all--to be given to Indonesia, military or economic; this was while [Achmed] Sukarno was still president--the President of the United States had to make an affirmative determination; this is a political act that it was in the best interests of the United States to continue this program or to give this money. And the damned thing was so written that you had to go to the President I think it was once a year and get him to go out on a limb publicly and say that Sukarno was a lovely fellow. (Laughter) It was really awful.

Well, I guess it was in late December, this problem came up. I tried to push it off as much as I could, knowing that, first, the President wasn't going to like this, and second, that he wasn't going to have time to think about it. But we had felt, those of us in the Far Eastern business, that one of the most important things the United States was doing was supporting Sukarno's enemies--well, the people who turned out to be his enemies at any rate, the military--at a very low level. We were encouraging them to come to the United States to get trained here, and so forth and so on. And we were giving them some pistols and jeeps and other such things to keep control of the communists who were getting aid from the Chinese and from the Russians. This was one of those very delicate programs. There was tremendous political flak about it. No one liked it. But we were trying, nevertheless, to do it, and we were pretty successful.

Well, this thing came up to President Johnson, and all his political instincts were against doing what we were asking him to

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do. He kept pointing out to us that--he never said it in so many words baldly, but the clear inference was that we didn't know a damned thing about Congress and it was about time we found out that you just couldn't get a president to sign something like this; he'd lose votes everywhere, and he'd look foolish. And of course our argument was: well, maybe that's so, but it's too late; you've got to do it; otherwise, the whole program collapses and we've lost what few friends we have left in Indonesia. This was the one issue which I have the feeling, if I recall right, that Valenti and Jenkins were very helpful on.

Finally, I can't remember what our solution was. There was some peculiar thing that we did. The President signed a piece of paper, but this is very confidential--then he didn't publish it for some time afterwards. He waited until the middle of the summer, when the election campaign was all [over]. You know, one of those tricks. It was very skillful, and it worked.

M: Followed the law and kept the program going, but didn't risk anything.

F: Followed the law. That's it exactly.

M: This kind of jumps ahead for just one question here. You made the comment earlier that Mr. Kennedy didn't watch the Vietnam question except sporadically a lot of time. Did you get the same impression under Mr. Johnson during the year of 1964 that this really wasn't one of the front burner issues, that he was busy with other things?

F: Oh, very much so. 1964 was the election.

M: Yes.

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F: He did everything to convey to his associates that their principal job in foreign affairs was to keep things on the back burner. One of the minor things that he did was to tell me to get out of the White House and go over to the State Department. Principally, he didn't know the State Department very well then. I think he had the typical legislator's distrust of it, and he wanted his own man over there to be sure those damned fools didn't do something stupid while he was out in the hustings trying to get elected. And the instructions were "Keep the lid on. I don't want to have headlines about some accident in Vietnam. And if I do, Forrestal, it will be your fault." It was that kind of a [situation]. (Laughter)

M: That I suppose is the best lead-in of all. You're described, among others, by Hilsman in his book for example, as one of the inner circle, or whatever, under Kennedy. Does this begin to change immediately after the assassination, or did you stay in sort of the inner circle until you left the government?

F: Oh, no, no. Very, very quickly after the assassination, the President I don't think had a use for a so-called inner circle of the type that Kennedy had. His instincts were all to rely much more heavily on the established public, political fellows that were his appointees or Kennedy's appointees: the Cabinet, the National Security Council as a council rather than its underlings. He used the Bundy staff. First of all, gradually, over a period of time, it just got different kinds of people in it. He picked people from inside the government: Civil Service, Foreign Service, CIA, people

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who were not outsiders. Even Jimmy Thompson came over, I guess, as that sort of fellow. Bob Komer certainly was put into his spot because he was that kind of a fellow. [Carl] Kaysen had left. Most of the outside individual's were beginning to go away.

I think in my own case, his principal interest was to have somebody over there in State, because he felt he needed that, that that was the place where decisions ought to be made, not in his own office in the White House. So different from Kennedy. Then there was the other thing, the emotional thing, we were not his men. And although he was incredibly courteous, even thoughtful sometimes, to the holdovers, it was quite clear that he was trying to find or looking around for his own way of doing things and his own people. So really I think the only thing he hoped [for] from us is that we would somehow hold things together until the election. And that's what we did.

M: Did he change the function of the national security operation in the White House drastically, or did just this change of personnel change it over a period of time?

F: It changed more over a period of time. You see, he was away a great deal of the time beginning in April, 1964. He was campaigning. It was very hard to get to him. You couldn't get [to him]--well, you could. On Tonkin Gulf, yes, we could get to him. But short of something like that, it was very hard. What you had to do, really, was to convince the Secretaries of State and Defense rather than the President that something ought to be done. I mean, if that was your

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idea, if Hilsman were still there and if he had wanted to do something, he would have had to have gone to them rather than to the President. Because the President a) wasn't in town, and b) when he was in town, the last thing he wanted to be bothered with was Vietnam.

M: One of the criticisms that you and Hilsman had in early 1963 was that there was no tying together of military and civilian effort in Vietnam. Is that one of the reasons for the interagency committee that you chaired? To try to kind of get a handle on that?

F: Yes. Yes. It was. And it didn't work. But the reason for the committee--I don't know who thought this up; I think it was largely McNamara's idea. It was twofold. First, there was some recognition, although not much, by McNamara and Rusk that the dispute which had surfaced at the time of Diem between the civilians, to use a loose, sloppy word, who were engaged in Vietnam and the military people had gotten out of hand; that it was beginning to divide the government and you weren't getting accurate information; you were getting distorted information from two different sources. And it was just a very bad show, and also, some of your activities in the field were beginning to fraction and break up.

There was a fellow called Bill [William H.] Sullivan, who was later our ambassador to Laos.

M: Now back as deputy assistant secretary.

F: That's right. He's a very bright fellow, extremely bright, who won't tell you anything for obvious reasons. (Laughter)

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M: (Laughter) I don't know. Those old professionals will surprise you.

F: They might. They might. If they really thought they would be safe, they might.

He was asked I think originally by Kennedy maybe--this I'm not sure of. But anyway, he started this committee at McNamara's insistence. McNamara was getting furious that his military establishment was being undercut by civilians. So he wanted to have a very high-level, intergovernment committee which would prevent these disagreements from being blown up all out of proportion, and, in a more positive way, would coordinate at least in Washington the execution of policy, and try to see that the military and the political went hand in hand. Hilsman's criticism, and I guess my own, too, went somewhat deeper than that, because that device was just an administrative device to coordinate policy. Hilsman's criticism went more to the whole philosophy of what it was we could do out there, and he tended to think that our military establishment was not a useful tool, at least our conventional military establishment wasn't a useful tool, because it was not responsive to political direction and sensitivity and because they didn't even have the equipment or techniques to handle this kind of fighting. He was a guerrilla-warrior type.

M: I see.

F: But when President Johnson came in, and this I think is partly [why], I think I half persuaded them of this. I told him that it wasn't enough to have a committee in Washington; that wasn't going to do

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anything. But what you really had to have was out in the field where the action was, there had to be somebody, hopefully a civilian, who would take, and who would be given sufficient authority to take, the Westmoreland operation, the AID agency, the CIA, and the USIS, and on a daily basis make sure that they stuck together and that they all knew what each other were doing. Because we'd have these terrible things where villages would be smashed where the AID agency had just finished some sort of incredible program.

M: They always got in the paper when that happened. (Laughter)

F: You recall that. And Johnson said, "That's a good idea." He sent Sullivan out there to do this. That left nobody in the State Department. And at the same time, I think as I said, President Johnson wanted to have somebody in the State Department anyway. So he gave me this double job. In effect, spying on Dean Rusk is what he had half in mind and, also, giving McNamara a chance to have an input into the policy-making function in the State Department.

M: Did you report directly to President Johnson or through the Secretary?

F: Directly.

M: You reported directly.

F: But only for a while, because it took Dean Rusk a very short time to capture the President's confidence; and very quickly, certainly by the Tonkin Gulf or during the Tonkin Gulf episodes, by that time, any suggestion that I was there to spy had long since disappeared. But at the beginning, I think quite frankly, that's what he had in mind.

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M: You also participated that spring, didn't you, in the review group that William Bundy operated to consider options.

F: Oh, yes.

M: You and Chester Cooper and some others. How far-ranging was that reconsideration? Was it simply a consideration of tactics, or did you all pursue the option of perhaps reversing the commitment?

F: No. That was a most peculiar exercise. First of all, it was done as--at least it started out to be--a planning operation; that is, an objective review of alternative possibilities in the area and alternative tactics, while you were carrying on with your left hand the day-to-day business of trying to make the thing run. So I was largely concerned with the practical problems of the day-to-day stuff. I had relatively little to do with the writing of the papers and the forward planning that the Bundy group was doing. This was an effort that, again, was pushed by McNamara. He wanted this, he said, and he was quite right. He pointed out that we really had run out of intellectual capital in Vietnam, that we had not thought through what our response [was] to be if trends that were already visible developed to a critical point. And he laid out several objectives and goals for this effort. Bill Bundy, who's a good lawyer, also wanted to be sure--and he was made the head of this effort--that you got the disagreements as well as the agreements into these papers. And one of the more amusing things is that he asked me who is after all committed to the policy that we had already been pursuing to attempt to write a scenario for a disengagement,

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which ran against my . . . But I'm also a lawyer, so I did as good a job as I possibly could. He asked George Bell to write a political appreciation for the scenario that I was writing. I was going to do the practical thing: what you did, how do you do it.

M: Right. What do you do with people?

F: And Ball had the rationale, the philosophical rationale. Other people did other things, including some very heavy contingency military commitments, none of them as large as what we actually did, but nearly that big. A lot of work was done on air assaults, bombardments of the North. Several scenarios were written for that. I believe that Bill Sullivan came back for that, and he was the one that worked most on what it turned out we actually decided to do, which was the slow, very slow, escalation of bombing of the North. It turned out also not to have been a very wise idea, in my judgment.

M: But do you get the impression that some basic decisions were being made by default during this contingency planning in a sense that these contingencies became self-fulfilling in a way?

F: Yes, a little bit. I don't know whether the planning caused it so much as the actual events that were occurring in the field. Beginning sometime in the middle of 1964, perhaps partly because of our election campaign, there were a number of positive things we probably should have been doing in Vietnam that we couldn't, because the President wasn't around, and because the government was new, and because we didn't have an election yet. But anyway, for whatever reason, during the summer of 1964 and going right through until I left the government, the internal political situation in Vietnam began to

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deteriorate very rapidly. I didn't see the end of it, but even at the time that I left, it was getting serious, so serious as to force you to start to think about what you'd do.

M: Now it differed from the Diem [situation], because this time you were thinking in terms of a military defeat.

F: We had to. I can't pinpoint the exact time, but it was kind of a snowballing process. Just after Diem died, we had the [Duong Van] Minh government.

M: Right.

F: Which didn't do too badly. Then we got ourselves--and I don't know how this ever happened--well, it's perhaps not worthwhile going into this. Something went wrong, and the Minh government was overthrown. General [Nguyen] Khanh took over.

M: Is there something that we did or could have prevented?

F: My guess is we could have prevented it. My guess is that our people in the field, principally our Ambassador at that time, failed utterly to understand that the one thing you could not afford was another change of government so soon after the Diem problem. Because, each time the government changed, your whole provincial apparatus fell to pieces. All your district chiefs, your province chiefs would get fired and a new bunch would come in, with a consequent collapse of internal administration. But anyway, we had gone through these series of governments. And each time one of those things happened, the rural--whatever those were called--pacification programs, the rural aid programs, all these programs, got tremendous

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setbacks. And the South Vietnamese military response to these setbacks was to do all the things they weren't supposed to do-- heavy attacks and smashing up more people.

So during the summer while no one really had a hard grasp on what was happening in the field, the situation was getting more critical than it ever had been. I don't believe that certainly up until March there was any justification for really thinking seriously about U.S. involvement on a mass scale. But there was plenty of justification for worrying about how to shore up this shaky government out there, what you could do, if anything, to convince the North Vietnamese that they ought not to be tempted to move in. It was really on those two grounds that the bombing option was thought of and was supported. It turned out, again in hindsight, one can make an argument that the bombing may have precipitated the massive infiltration. I doubt that this is true, but anyway, you can make that argument. It is made.

M: Was there any center of opposition to these type of contingency operations in the government? Was there a lot of dissent that bombing would be a bad idea during this period?

F: Relatively little. I think George Ball--you could never tell about George, whether he's being the lawyer, or being the devil's advocate, or what he really thought. My guess is that George privately probably argued with the President, and out of my hearing certainly, that the whole thing was dangerous, that we shouldn't be putting this much, these resources, we should be paying more attention to Europe, because

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that was George's big thing--Western Europe. John McNaughton, who was perhaps the brightest fellow we ever had in this area, was privately asking some extremely tough questions. He used to come up to my office almost every afternoon about six or seven in the evening, and sit, and worry.

M: He was assistant secretary for ISA at that time?

F: That's right. But he never brought them up, or he felt unwilling or unable to talk to anyone else about it. There was a bad thing in this period. The government was extremely scared; it was scared of its president, among other things; it was scared of itself. There was a tremendous nervousness that if you expressed an opinion, it might somehow leak out, get published somewhere, and the President would be furious, and everybody's head would be cut off and that sort of thing. So you had a [situation where] there was not much free communication in the government among these areas.

M: Was that fear based on reasonable certainty? I mean, had the performance demonstrated that by that time?

F: I think it was bark rather than bite. There was more noise about it. There was tremendous noise. You'd get these messages or directives from President Johnson. There were some members on his staff who were particularly concerned about security leaks; a man called [Marvin] Watson who probably did more damage than anybody in his very small family way. No, I think there was enough reason so that people were scared, and I think it inhibited to some extent an exchange of information and prevented the President himself

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eventually from getting a lot of facts that he should have had.

M: What about Tonkin and the events surrounding that? You were the State Department at that point.

F: Yes.

M: Did you get involved in any of the consideration that the President gave to that problem?

F: Oh, yes. Yes.

M: Do you want to just describe that? That would probably be the easiest way of doing it.

F: Sure. I'll try to generalize quickly and then go into detail about it. The principal problem with the Gulf of Tonkin, of course, was-- the thing broke down really into two parts. But first and most pressing was to ascertain what had happened. This occupied so much time and so much effort of everybody who was supposed to be expert in this area that our response to what happened I think was largely handled by other people, principally the President's own political friends, probably in the Senate. The working staffs and sort of my committee and McNamara, I know, and I think Rusk, too, and certainly Bundy were just preoccupied with trying to get the information out of the Navy: "What the hell happened?" At least on the first night.

M: Was that because there was always a suspicion that this was contrived in some way, or just uncertainty?

F: No, it's terribly difficult to get anybody who's never been in this thing to understand the mechanical difficulty of communications, particularly through chains of command. First of all, your radio

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channels don't always work; and if they do, they work in a coded way that was very, very hard to understand what's actually being said. But that is made infinitely worse when each commander in the chain of command takes it upon himself to vary, change, alter, or emphasize the story. So it took at least a week to get the hard evidence. I think everybody was convinced within three or four days that what happened happened. But to go to the Congress, or to go to the public, or to go to anybody, with a convincing case was very difficult.

Now, I think there were two kinds of theories about what you did. There was a group of people in the government who tended to think--certainly in the field this was very strongly felt--who had wanted to find a reason, a politically acceptable reason, to surface or commence the attacks on the North, the air attacks on the North. Everybody understood that if we ever started bombing the North, this would be quite a departure from the past. It was something the previous administration had not done; I think, at times, said they never would do. And it certainly ran against the philosophy of U.S. involvement out there. You had to find, for political reasons, if you had decided, as some people wanted to decide, that we were going to embark on bombing anyway for tactical reasons, then you had to find a way to do it. And the Tonkin Gulf for those people was made to order.

Also then, and I don't know how this happened, there apparently were some people who also felt that the President's authority in this area was dubious, not just President Johnson, but Kennedy, too,

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that we had just about stretched the legal limit of the President's power to commit U.S. force already, before Tonkin; that if you're going to go any further, you better lay the groundwork legally and politically for something more.

Now, I was not part of any of that, and I don't know who the people were that were involved in that. I don't think I even saw the resolution. That was all Congress. It was handled by some other group of people. That was a bit of surprise when that came out, because none of the operating people had any inkling.

M: Your contingencies hadn't provided for the necessity of doing something like that at some point?

F: No, there was, as I recall, in the event we were going to have to put ground troops in, it was generally assumed that you would get a resolution out of Congress. And in fact, there were drafts of such a resolution, but they had nothing to do with Tonkin. And I think that most of the people who worked on those drafts and on those contingencies were as surprised as anybody else to find some of the language that they'd used turn up in this Tonkin Resolution. The whole decision to go to Congress on this was really not--somebody could say I'm wrong, because at this point I was in a very narrow field. But my recollection is this was not a subject discussed at the working level. It must have come from a much higher level and probably outside the executive branch of the government. We were, frankly, quite surprised. I think most people who wanted to respond and retaliate for the Tonkin thing felt this could be done and quite

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happily within the current authorization. The President would simply say that we were regretfully forced to do this because we can't have our ships sunk on the high seas.

M: But you were involved in that stream?

F: Yes.

M: The retaliatory?

F: Oh, yes. And I'm afraid I thought it was a good idea.

M: Was that a previously made decision--that under certain circumstances, we would retaliate in this way?

F: No.

M: It did arise after the [attack]?

F: It arose after the attack. The only thing that may . . . There was no real decision even to start the air bombardments at that time. But obviously this strengthened the hand of those who wanted to accelerate and start hitting the North a little more heavily.

M: The retaliation occurred and presumably at some point the President made that decision. Was there any big objection, drastic objection to taking the retaliatory action?

F: None. Absolutely none. And so far as I know, again the record is much better than I am, but one of the things that irritates me after the fact is that people like Senator [J. William] Fulbright and others say, with the benefit of hindsight, that they didn't agree or they wouldn't have agreed had they known more. That just couldn't be less true. I think the country, everybody I talked to, all my recollection is, I think even George Ball would have said "Yes, this

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is the right thing to do." No, there was no [objection]. There were people who said you ought to consider what this means, but nobody objected to doing it.

M: What about the critics' contention that the vessels that were attacked on Tonkin Gulf were in fact supporting covert operations of the South Vietnamese in such a way that a reasonable man might have assumed that they would bring forth an attack by the North Vietnamese? Was that an understanding that had been considered?

F: Well, that was gone into in some detail, at least the facts: precisely what our ships were doing there, why they were there at the time, the relationship which turned out to be nil, but anyway, the possible relationship between their presence and certain activities by the South Vietnamese in some islands that were just off the coast of North Vietnam. All this was looked into. And all of us were quite clear there was no intentional connection. That is not to say that if you are sitting on the other side looking that you might come to some other conclusion by accident or deliberately. But unless there was real administrative disloyalty somewhere down the line, it would be very hard to conclude that there was any intentional connection.

We were aware of this as a political problem even at the time. And some effort was made, not terribly convincing, but it was made at any rate, to try to point out by time diagrams and the tracks of these vessels that not even to an outsider should it have appeared that they had anything to do with the efforts of the South Vietnamese. Of course, the North didn't make these distinctions. No, of course not.

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M: Then your next and I suppose last, critical point before your departure from the government was the decision to begin bombing on a regular scale. We had missed several further opportunities to retaliate in between Tonkin and then. Was that strictly political? The attack on Bien Hoa, for example, right before the election--we decided not to retaliate because of the American political situation?

F: Well, I think in the President's mind, it must have been. Because he fundamentally made those decisions. By that time, after Tonkin, even despite the campaign, he was back in the Vietnam business heavily. There were a number of people, and I was part of that number, who didn't believe in this retaliatory thing at all. There was a group, including myself, who felt that bombing was dubious as a means of getting a message across to the North and of no use at all insofar as shoring up the Southern government. We never believed that whether we bombed or didn't bomb would make a damned bit of difference to the South Vietnamese government. Our Ambassador thought otherwise, but we didn't. We did, however, believe that if you did do it--and maybe it was worth just trying--you should do it very quietly in a very, very limited way over such a long period of time, that is, three or four months, as to see whether you couldn't get the North Vietnamese to say to themselves, "It's not worth running the risk, even though it may only be a slight one, of having to absorb a lot of bombing. We can do what we want to do without having to run this risk." We also miscalculated and thought that the North Vietnamese interest in sending troops to the South was probably minimal. Well, sure,

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they'd send five thousand a year, that's what they'd always been doing; but it wouldn't get much above that.

M: When did that change?

F: About December.

M: It did change, obviously, by the end of the year?

F: Yes. I think it did. You can't tell, because there was always this tremendous delay between the time you collected the intelligence and the time it ever got back to Washington. But I would guess, subject to correction, that the real increase in infiltration, effectively, must have begun at the very end of December; and then, [it had] gotten quite high in January and February.

M: Still pre-dating our regular . . .?

F: But pre-dating our regular bombing. There was reason to believe that they were getting ready to do this. And those people who thought it would be all right to try out the bombing felt this would be one among many things we might just do to indicate our seriousness of purpose. One of the things a lot of people disagreed with, though, was what [Ambassador Henry Cabot] Lodge had--the tit-for-tat theory. There was a fight, and Bien Hoa was one of them. It was typical of the way the fight occurred. The people in the field--I think probably the Air Force was responsible for this one--sometimes gave the impression they were actually trying to set things up so that you'd have an incident to which you could react or to which you could retaliate. Bien Hoa is the closest to being proof of that. They moved these airplanes in when they had no reason to, not the faintest

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tactical, strategic, logistical, political reason to take obsolete jets out of the Philippines and park them all in a row undefended on Bien Hoa airfield. And you knew, if you'd studied the Viet Cong for very long, that this is something they had to attack. They couldn't restrain themselves.

M: Symbolically if nothing else. (Laughter)

F: Absolutely essential! We made all these arguments to the Defense Department, but they couldn't . . . For reasons of their own, they went ahead, and the President didn't think that was important enough to tackle the Defense Department on. Then they were all blown up. And the President at that point did, and I think quite rightly, say, "Well, this is not going to influence what we do. If we decide to go and escalate this thing, it will be because we decided it on our own and not because the enemy has pushed us into this." [On] Pleiku, he apparently reacted differently, but I wasn't around then, and I don't know what went on in his mind then.

M: Where were you? Were you out of town?

F: No, I was out of the government [by] Pleiku.

M: In February?

F: Effectively, yes. I left on March 1, but I had ceased reading cables, really, a month before.

M: It was possible, even at that point, that the decision hadn't really been made to bomb regularly? It was still a retaliatory thing?

F: No. No, I think, the decision to bomb had been virtually arrived at at the end of December. I was getting less and less involved

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in these policy matters, for reasons that I don't . . . well, I suppose probably because I didn't really want to be. Also, I had been against some of this. Then I think maybe that as decisions began to be made that were leading towards it, naturally, you're less and less involved. But my recollection, the last I can remember, is that we had a bombing program that was supposed to start by being covert or at least deniable. And it was supposed to go very, very close to the Laotian border. We had for some time had a campaign of trying to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and we still do, I think. The theory was that you would go to a place called Mughia, which was a pass.

M: Can you spell that? The transcriber will never get it.

F: (Laughter) Mughia. M-U-G-H-I-A. Just as an illustration of how the thing went, Mughia Pass is on the border between Vietnam and Laos. So you could bomb there and you could claim it was on one side or the other or that you just had to go to hit that pass. There was another pass of the same sort that was further north. Then in a matter of weeks later, you would do a similar thing. You would bomb a North Vietnamese military camp, which was itself not a formal military camp, but a staging point for supplies coming through these two passes. Then you would wait another very long period of time, and you'd do something more. It was sort of a creeping thing. The theory was that you could always stop it if it didn't work. Or if you got any kind of a signal, because we kept listening for signals all the time from the North Vietnamese, you would stop it. Even in January, we were still operating generally on that theory. You always kept

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telling yourself, "Well, if it doesn't work, we stop." A lot of people didn't think it would work. There was that feeling: not that we should get out of Vietnam, but this was just not a very smart thing to do.

M: Was this fairly clearly understood? That if you went into this bombing program in a very big way, that it would very likely involve the introduction of ground troops, if for nothing else to logistically support the bombing effort?

F: You mean our own ground troops?

M: Yes.

F: Absolutely not. I don't know quite why we didn't think so, but I don't recall anybody ever thinking that. There were two things they really didn't think. First, they didn't think the bombing would in any way require us to send in ground troops. In fact, there was a decision made sometime--now I can't recall whether it was in February, March, or April--which sent in a Marine detachment near Danang to defend certain SAM sites that we had put in around there--Hawk missile sites. I remember that caused a lot of "What are we doing this for?" And those of us who were against the ground troops, which I think was the majority of the government outside the Defense Department, thought that was probably a poor idea, didn't understand why we had done it. But not, the people, even those who were supporting a bombing, it never occurred to them that the next step would have to be or might be American ground troops. The other thing that didn't occur to them and this is more difficult to

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understand: they really didn't think the North Vietnamese would respond by increasing their infiltration. They thought that what might happen is that you'd just have a continuing level of infiltration. But I don't think they really thought that the bombing was somehow connected with the North Vietnamese reaction. I don't think even today the evidence is in on whether or not there was that connection.

My guess is that the North Vietnamese had decided long before, probably at the time of Minh's overthrow, that the time had come to make the big effort. It takes them six months to gin up one of these things.

M: So the bombing didn't change their minds one way or the other, either discourage them or encourage them in that case?

F: That's right.

M: You left then, you said, shortly thereafter. I assume that there is substance involved in your resignation. That is, you said you had been opposing many of these decisions, so is it fair to say that you left because you were out of sympathy with the policy?

F: Well, now it is. But, yes, I think under the circumstances of this interview, the answer to that is yes. But I try to be careful never to indicate that.

M: Why?

F: Because I am one of those people that believes and perhaps wrongly that if you are working for a President and you have done your best to convince him to do A and he chooses to do B, you just don't leave

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and start screaming at him afterwards. If you do that, you destroy the very basis on which government functions. You make it almost impossible, for example, for a Cabinet officer or anybody who is close to a president ever to give him honest advice. You make it very difficult for him to believe he's getting honest advice. So I'm not at all in sympathy with those people who go out and write books about what they did or did not do.

M: You've indicated a couple of times in passing that sort of in hindsight perhaps it would have been a good idea to reconsider the whole nature of what we were trying to do out there, with a view of perhaps cutting our losses. Were there a lot of people who were beginning to think that? By the time you left the White House, say, was it very widespread?

F: No. I think not at all. I think one of the most extraordinary things is that--certainly not by the time I left. And my guess from having talked to people who stayed there longer, it wasn't for almost a year; well, really, certainly not until the summer of 1965. Even just a few people began to question even the introduction of substantial ground forces which I, had I known about it... my own feeling at the time of getting out was that there was a tendency to begin thinking along these lines. I'd never thought that we would ever dream of sending in half a million men. But I was getting nervous about the way people were talking. But I don't think anybody connected with the operation really had come to the point of saying our whole posture out there is suspect and wrong until about a year

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after the troops were sent, 1966.

M: 1966, that would be.

F: Right around then. Very, very late, under the circumstances.

M: So Mr. Johnson still at the point you left at least wasn't getting a lot of advice to do anything differently than what was being done.

F: No, he really wasn't. I don't know. One of the areas which for history I think is exceedingly important to find out about and on which I have no information at all is the period from February 1, 1965 until May or June.

M: Before the troop decision. Between the bombing and the troop decision.

F: Between the bombing and the troop decision. I take it that during January and up until the first of February, we were doing the slow bombing stuff. I'm not even clear when it became public that we were doing that. I think maybe in January little bits of . . . The North Vietnamese, by the way, had never complained about it, never, until it got to be immense. But sometime between February and June, a series of decisions were taken which were at complete variance with the basis on which we were there in the first place. If you go back and look at any [speeches]--there are about four speeches, one in particular--which President Kennedy made describing the nature of the U.S. presence, he never called it a commitment, I don't think. The reasons why we were , it was always on the assumption that we were there to help the Vietnamese to help themselves. It was their war. If they couldn't win it, we couldn't win it.

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Constantly an attempt which turned out to be fruitless, but anyway an attempt to keep your options open to get out. If the patient died, well, that wasn't the fault of the doctor. He had done his best. And that was deeply imbued in most of the people like myself who had participated in the decisions which had gradually increased our commitment from about six thousand people to about sixteen thousand by the time Kennedy died.

So it was pretty shocking to come back--I went away for three months--and find that we were at the point of putting in American troops. The thing that really shocked me was that the Pentagon acquiesced in this. Because for years they were very clear that the last thing they wanted to do was to have American soldiers in Asia. They were still suffering from Korea.

M: Something changed between February and June.

F: Something happened.

M: Seventy-five thousand were announced in June or July, whichever.

F: Something incredible happened. It's a remarkable turning point. And someday I'd like to find out what it was.

M: What about Laos? You said Mr. Johnson had been interested in it as vice president. Were there specific issues that got close presidential attention in Laos while you were still in government?

F: Oh, yes. Well, Laos, happily, when President Johnson was president, was not on the front burner. That had been kept successfully off it almost by a miracle or a series of miracles. He became interested in it, as I recall, rather briefly at the time when the Geneva Conference was re-convening.

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M: 1962.

F: 1962, that's right. In the summer of 1962, it came back. And my recollection is that his interest there was--and I could be wrong about it--but I think he was then being very conservative about the commitment of any U.S. force, at least in that country. [My recollection is that he was] more conservative than President Kennedy was and certainly more conservative than many of President Kennedy's advisors were at the time. I hope I'm right about this. I think I am. He attended several, or one or two at any rate, of the kind of National Security Council meeting that Kennedy had, which is not a statutory one, but an informal thing. I do vaguely recall going to his house and briefing him about the Laos situation during one afternoon, during the course of which he kind of muttered about, "Well, I hope you fellows aren't going too far there. It's not, perhaps, as important as you think it is. And it is one hell of a poor place to fight." Of course, he was quite right about that. There's no way to get to it, as he pointed out. And there's no way to get out once you're there.

M: Was he consistent on that view during the presidency, too?

F: Yes.

M: Just always very conservative about it?

F: He was conservative about it. Another thing that he was very conservative about--and I happen to think he was absolutely dead right about this--was Cambodia.

M: Leave Sihanouk alone?

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- F: Leave him alone; don't go out and call him names; he's a very small country; it's undignified for a big country to kick little countries around; you know, just leave him be, leave him be. He's not doing us as much damage as the military think he is. He was absolutely clear about that. And he was clear about Laos for the same reason. He was really quite clear about not taking on things that didn't have to be taken on. It was just on this Vietnam thing I think that he felt differently.
- M: I noticed that according to Hilsman you were used once by President Kennedy as an emissary to General Eisenhower. Did Mr. Johnson ever use you in that way?
- F: Yes, he did, once. He sent me to see Mr. Truman. I think this must have been around the Tonkin time. And it was just one of those funny things. I took a plane and went to St. Louis; then down to his Ranch and then back in one day, which was a fairly strenuous thing to do. But he was very conscious, as all presidents are, of the importance of keeping ex-presidents, the members of the small club, informed.
- M: What is the importance of that? Is it cosmetic?
- F: I think it's psychological. Presidents are lonely, and there are very few other people that they can talk to. Now, he didn't go out himself and see all these people, although I think he did bring General Eisenhower in once or twice. But he was very anxious, and so was Kennedy before him, to keep this little group sufficiently informed, so that, should the day ever come when he needed them,

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they would not be able to say, "Well, I don't know anything about it, Mr. President."

M: He wasn't really seeking advice from them though?

F: No. He wants to keep them in the know and also give them a feeling that if they had something to complain about that here was a fellow that they could talk to. He was smart, too. He was much more cagey than President Kennedy. He didn't just send me out there; he sent Charlie Murphy, who was one of Truman's very good friends.

M: Right.

F: Actually, President Johnson was probably more skillful at that kind of thing than his predecessor was, and cared more about it.

M: You mentioned you were at the Ranch just very, very briefly. Is the style that the critics of Mr. Johnson talk about really a matter that has substance at the time, that is, that it makes it difficult for him to run the shop in foreign affairs because of a style quality that he had?

F: Yes, but that's such a personal thing. The people who would object to President Johnson's style are people who he just, in the long run, didn't need anyway, or at least, couldn't have used. And every man has a way of running himself, running his office. Every man has personality characteristics. But that doesn't mean for an instant that such a man is better able or less able to conduct business than someone else. What it does mean is that he has to get different kinds of people to help him. I think President Johnson was quite successful in getting the people that he needed that responded to

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his style. He got rid of eventually or people left him who didn't like his style. But the country can hardly be said to have suffered on account of that, I don't think.

M: What about anywhere else in your area, Far East? Anything regarding China or Korea, for example, that comes back to you particularly of Mr. Johnson's insights or viewpoints on any matters? You mentioned Indonesia.

F: Indonesia. Well, I guess this would be true with sort of the exception of the kind of thing that I told you about on Cambodia or Laos. He had congressional ideas in foreign policy. No question about that. It was a tendency to be [that way], at least in his earlier years when I saw him, although I'm sure he must have learned a hell of a lot more about it afterwards. But he shared, generally speaking--a little more sophisticated, but not much--the Russell, Stennis, somewhat conservative southern view of the outside world. It isn't even a question of being conservative. I suppose it's more a question of being a little simplistic about the way the world is built and what moves it outside the country. He had, of course, an immense understanding of what moves the government and particularly what moves Congress. But when it came to talking about the philosophy of American involvement or American goals in foreign affairs, I think it's fair to say that at least at that time his views were generally what [Arthur V.] Vandenburg would have said in 1946. They hadn't changed an awful lot. There were good guys and bad guys in the world. Some of the good guys, you know, might be difficult, but as long as they were your friends, you damn well

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supported them. Now having said that, he was also, since he was President, careful enough to modify those views upon occasion. For example, with Chiang Kai-Shek, who would normally be a man who most congressmen think is God's gift to the Asian world and who is actually not at all, a man whose time has passed a little bit--

M: A little bit?

F: Wait a minute. You're a historian!

M: Okay.

F: With respect to Chiang Kai-Shek, my recollection is--and it rather surprised me--President Johnson did not do what some of us expected him to do, that is, revert to the pre-Kennedy coddling of this fellow. He took a rather cool and, I think, by and large correct view. He resisted the efforts of the military and the intelligence community to build Chiang Kai-Shek up, to politically support him publicly. He didn't embrace him, I don't think, even after I left, but certainly, not before. So I think on that, he was pretty good. It was a little tougher with people like Sukarno. He tended to look upon Sukarno as a bad guy. And indeed Sukarno was a pretty awful fellow. But it was difficult for Johnson to believe that the United States, particularly the State Department, of all people, were capable of meddling in the political affairs of Indonesia by supporting the military faction against the Russians' and the Chinese attempts to subvert them.

M: He did embrace Korea fairly . . .

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F: Yes.

M: He apparently liked [Chung Hee] Park.

F: He liked Park very much. He had, I think, a great respect for Park. In fact, I think a lot of his attitude towards Vietnam was heavily influenced by the Korean War experience. He very often unconsciously--and I think Rostow probably fed him this--would make comparisons that were not entirely accurate between the Korean War and the political situation in Korea and the political situation in Vietnam. I don't think that the President at the outset thoroughly understood the nature of the Vietnamese war; namely, that it did partake of the civil war aspects; that there was a problem of getting political support of your people behind this government. I'm sure he did learn later that this was a difficulty. But he related that a lot to the Korean experience, which is quite different, where General Park represented something like a consensus leader and was a pretty tough fellow.

M: Did you get involved again once you left the government? Were you ever called back in on any [occasion]? Have you had any contact with President Johnson, direct or indirect, anywhere since that time?

F: No. Not really. I'm trying to think. I don't even think I saw him after I left Washington. No. I've had indirect [contact]... Lady Bird, I've had some notes from, and vice versa, because I used to write her a little bit about her activities in conservation.

M: But he hasn't treated you like he is alleged to have treated some

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people? Badmouthing them once they were gone?

F: Oh, no. I don't think so. No. If he has, I certainly haven't heard about it. And I don't think he would. I just don't think he would. He was never . . . No. We didn't agree, but I don't think either of us ever told each other we didn't really agree. He was extremely correct and, better than that, he was quite warm and I think probably still would be.

M: In spite of your Kennedy association and your doubts about what he believed in?

F: Yes.

M: Is there anything else you would like to add? I don't want to cut you off.

F: No, no. I think I've told you really more than probably I had to tell you.

M: Well, I appreciate you being so generous with your time and comments both.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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