

INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 2, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: ROSWELL GILPATRIC

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Gilpatric's office, Manhattan, New York

Tape 1 of 1

TG: Mr. Gilpatric, can you recall the circumstances under which you were named to chair the task force on Vietnam in 1961?

RG: Only that at a meeting in the Cabinet Room of the National Security Council the President announced that I was selected for that assignment. I assume that it was his own decision after recommendations from [Robert] McNamara and perhaps Mac [McGeorge] Bundy and it reflected his lack of confidence at that point in the group in the State Department, having been through a rather unsatisfactory experience in regard to Laos. But that's all I know about why I was picked rather than having somebody from State head it up.

TG: What was unsatisfactory about Laos and the State Department's performance?

RG: Well, the President didn't feel that he had gotten a very clear signal from the State Department experts on Southeast Asia. He also wasn't very satisfied with the response he got from the Joint Chiefs. He got five different recommendations at one point. And I believe he just felt he'd get some fresh attitude and approach, and I certainly was innocent of any great background of experience in the Far East, so he gave me the job. I didn't keep it, of course, after the President made his decisions on the report of the task force in May. The ongoing operations of the task force reverted to the State Department--a fellow named Cotrell ran it. So I was just in charge of it up until the time the President considered the report and made his decision and then it reverted to the usual channels.

TG: So you're suggesting that there's not much to the reports that this decision was due to the tendency to view Vietnam as a military problem rather than a civil problem?

RG: No, no. I think at that juncture we were all pretty agnostic because during the briefings that the President got during the transition between the Eisenhower Administration and his administration, Vietnam was never brought up as a major topic. Berlin and Laos were the principal foreign policy problems.

TG: Edward Lansdale, a figure of some repute, was in your office at this time, was he not?

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 2

RG: Yes, I inherited him from Jim [James H.] Douglas, my predecessor as the deputy secretary of defense. From the beginning I found him a very useful, knowledgeable assistant. He was a soldier-of-fortune type. He was not trusted by the professional foreign service officers because when he'd been in the Philippines and also in South Vietnam before, he tended to operate sort of out of channels, and they didn't think he was their man. Therefore they weren't keen about having him have too much authority, but he was useful to me, to McNamara and later on, of course, Robert Kennedy picked him to head up the whole Mongoose Operation. My experience with him was that he was useful; you didn't have to accept all his judgments or ideas. And I was, I suppose, instrumental in getting him his generalship. I recommended him. He was a colonel when I came in, but I recommended him for a promotion to brigadier general.

TG: Was any of this tied to the fact that he seems to have had pretty direct ties at one time to the Dulles brothers?

RG: That didn't come up that I can recall. It was simply this feeling that he was sort of a solo performer, an operator who didn't go along with the usual channels and guidelines in the foreign service field. But later on, of course, as is well known, Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge pretty much insisted that Lansdale be sent out to be his aide, or one of his aides, when Lodge became ambassador of South Vietnam.

TG: Why didn't that happen earlier? Didn't Diem ask for him earlier?

RG: The State Department resisted his going back to Vietnam as long as it could, but when Lodge came in and he made it a condition they had no choice. In the meantime Lansdale was working for me, and of course he was one of my principal assistants during that period I headed up the task force from March until May. And then he continued to act as my adviser on a number of things. For example, I was the Defense Department representative on the 5412 group that oversaw intelligence operations, and I consulted him in that regard. When I was on the counter-insurgency group that the Attorney General set up, I used him there. I used him right along until he went to Vietnam in 1963 with Ambassador Lodge.

TG: What was there to the rumor that he at one time was being considered to be the ambassador to Vietnam?

RG: I never heard that. If it was under consideration, the word didn't reach me, and as I say, I think it was just simply and solely Lodge's insistence on having him that got him out there. And then when he came back, he--or maybe it was before, I've forgotten the sequence of events--but he spent a lot of time on that Mongoose project destabilizing Castro, with Robert Kennedy.

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 3

TG: Were there covert operations that early, in 1961, against North Vietnam?

RG: I don't recall there coming before the 5412 group any specific projects. I think there were some ongoing activities that had been started prior to the Kennedy Administration, and I was aware that the agency, the CIA, had quite a force out there. They certainly were active in regard to the Montagnards. But I don't recall any specific covert project such as blowing up bridges or trying to disrupt the functioning of the North Vietnamese.

TG: There is the famous cable of August 24, about which there are a number of versions extant, and I wonder if you would give us your version of the sequence of events and phone calls.

RG: As you know, it was over a weekend, on a Sunday to be precise, and I think my first inkling of what was proposed came in a telephone call from Mike Forrestal at the White House which reached me out at my farm in Maryland on the Eastern Shore. Forrestal told me that he, working with [Averell] Harriman, [Roger] Hilsman and [Joseph] Mendenhall, as I recall, in State had composed this message; it had been read to the President up in Hyannis, it had been also read and I understood approved by Rusk, and I was told that the intention was to run down Max Taylor, that General [Victor] Krulak was going to get hold of Taylor. So my reaction was this was basically a State Department matter, a political matter, and if Rusk went along with it and the President went along with it, I wasn't going to oppose it. I relied on General Taylor, who had been to Vietnam several times and was much more knowledgeable about the local situation there than I was, to flush out any concerns from a military standpoint. But essentially I regarded it as something between the White House and the State Department, and therefore I didn't object to it and I concurred in it on those assumptions.

TG: Can you recall the form of language that you used? I know this is an apparently minor point, but did you say, "I concur on it," or we [inaudible]?

RG: I think I said, "I'll sign off for the Office of the Secretary of Defense." I know I didn't say specifically that I approve or concur, but in McNamara's absence I felt I should not hold it up, so I went along with it just like you countersign a voucher. I didn't take an affirmative position in regard to the wording or the substance of the message.

TG: There was a meeting of the principals the next day, as I recall, and there are stories that there were some second thoughts expressed at that time. Do you recall what took place at that meeting?

RG: I was present at a meeting at the White House Monday morning following the Sunday cable, and by that time McNamara was back; McCone was back, the President was back, Rusk was back. There was a general feeling that this group in State, Harriman, Hilsman

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 4

and Mendelhall, working with Forrestal, had pulled an end run, that they'd done this over the weekend when a number of the principals were out of town. And there was a general air of unhappiness about the way the thing had happened, not so much the substance as it was the fact this was all rushed through on a Sunday afternoon and evening at the end of August. But the conclusion was not to recall the message--the message had gone forward and no one was recommending, that I recall, to the President that he in effect reverse this message that went forward. Just a general feeling of unhappiness and the feeling that one group of the President's advisers had pulled a fast one.

TG: What was the President's attitude?

RG: Well, he was annoyed that there was a division amongst his advisers. He'd, I gather from what I've read since then, assumed that not only the State Department and the White House but the Defense Department both on the military and civilian side had approved this, so it was a unanimous recommendation to the President. When he found out there were reservations about it and less than a hundred per cent enthusiasm about it, he was annoyed. But that was the sense of the meeting; there wasn't any specific action to undo it.

TG: He didn't express his annoyance in the presence of everyone?

RG: He made his annoyance clear. I don't recall how he expressed himself, but it was perfectly evident to us as we left the meeting that he was not pleased with this particular performance of his advisers in State, Defense and on his own staff.

TG: Was this annoyance more directed at the group from State than anyone else, do you think?

RG: At that time he hadn't developed, as I recall it, the antipathy that he subsequently did regarding the operations of the Hilsman and Mendenhall. That came out later at some further sessions on Vietnam when the State Department tried to keep Ambassador Nolting from being present at meetings when they were discussing what should be done about the Diem government.

TG: Who in the State Department was doing this? Was this Mendenhall?

RG: I just recall that with Harriman's blessing and maybe very positive approval, Hilsman, Mendenhall and others who were working with that group were trying to take over jurisdiction in this area. The President came to resent the pressure, particularly when he found that General Krulak and the people from the Defense Department didn't go along and when Ambassador Nolting, for whom President Kennedy had a very high regard, was being excluded--he was the man who had been out in Vietnam for a couple of years and

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 5

the State representative didn't want him to be present. At one time he just stopped the proceedings and sent for Nolting and waited until Nolting appeared before he would go on with the meeting. But I think that sense of annoyance, irritation on the part of the President came after this session on Monday, the twenty-fifth of August.

TG: When Ambassador Nolting was brought into the meeting, did this introduce an element of contention that might not have been there otherwise?

RG: Harriman was very hot on Nolting and I thought very unfairly critical. Indeed, I never was present at a session with the President at which someone took the dressing down that Nolting did from Harriman. I think a lot of us were very surprised and rather shocked at Harriman's attitude, but Harriman held a unique position because of his age and prior experience. The President just made it clear that he continued to have confidence in Nolting and took into account his views as well as what he was getting from this Hilsman group in the State Department.

TG: Did Harriman merit his nickname?

RG: Yes, he could be very, very alligatorish.

TG: "The Crocodile," wasn't it?

RG: Yes.

TG: What was behind the announcement that we were going to withdraw a thousand men from Vietnam? I believe that was made in October, perhaps in September.

RG: Of 1963, that's right. From the very beginning of the President's exposure to the situation in Vietnam, he showed a great reluctance to see the United States involved militarily. That first came out in connection with his reaction to the recommendations of the task force when, as I recall it, there was something like sixteen hundred U.S. representatives, including the military assistance group, representatives from the Department of Agriculture, various other government agencies besides State that were actually in Vietnam at the time the Kennedy Administration began. Among the recommendations of the task force were that there be increases in the number of U.S. representatives out there, including a substantial increase in the military component for the purpose of training the home guard. We wanted to have the Vietnamese become more self-sufficient in the provinces away from Saigon, and we felt that that required more U.S. military, not in any combat role but in a training role.

The President resisted that idea, not in toto but certainly as far as numbers were concerned, and he cut back on the recommendations when he approved in general the

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 6

task force, and he continued to exhibit that reluctance to send more people out. In the summer of 1961 when Taylor and Walt Rostow came back and recommended that, in fact, a combat battalion going in under the guise of being an engineering group be sent out, he resisted that. And of course as late as September of 1963, either in a press conference or a speech, he made clear that the destiny of the South Vietnamese was in their hands and that the United States couldn't come in and determine their fate. He made it clear to McNamara and me that he wanted to not only hold the level of U.S. military presence in Vietnam down, but he wanted to reverse the flow and that's when this question of bringing back some of the U.S. military personnel came up. But it was in keeping with his general reluctance to see us sucked in militarily to Southeast Asia.

TG: Some people have suggested this was also by way of a signal to Diem at the time. Was there any flavor of that around?

RG: Yes, I think he wanted to get across to Diem and the South Vietnamese generals and the whole government apparatus out there that the U.S. wasn't going to take on what he regarded as their problems. We would be in an accessory advisory role but we weren't going to become the principals. So far as I could perceive up until Kennedy's death in November, he never varied from that general attitude.

TG: Are you among those who say that Kennedy would never have escalated in the way that Johnson did?

RG: Well, of course it's a hypothetical question. No one will ever know. Based on my exposure to the President's views over that nearly three year period, I felt he was looking for an opportunity to pull back and it would have been very hard to convince him to reverse course. But what he would have done if he had been president at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, if that had occurred, I don't know. No one can say what he would have done, but my view is that consistent with everything he did do and said before his death, he would have been very reluctant to involve ourselves to the extent that the country did after President Johnson took over.

TG: I'm not sure if you've told the story of where you were and what your thoughts were at the time of the assassination.

RG: I was meeting with McNamara, [David E.] Bell, the director of the budget, Jerry Weisner, and a group of others in the conference room in the Pentagon, going through the budget figures which were going to be presented to the President that weekend in Hyannis. And sometime around twelve-thirty my military assistant came in--my office was nearest to the conference room--and handed me a note that the President had been shot, no indication how seriously. And I just felt unable to utter the words so I passed the piece of paper around the table, and McNamara got up abruptly and left. No one felt enough in

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 7

control of himself to say anything, so the group just sort of dispersed and disappeared. The group in the White House went back, and in another half an hour I went in to see McNamara in his office and we were sort of in a state of shock or trauma. Finally the telephones began to ring and things had to be done, and my assignment was to go over to the CIA and meet with John McCone and start putting together whatever we could on [Lee Harvey] Oswald and others, while McNamara took over the preparations for the return of the President's body and the internment in Arlington and so forth. That was all a matter of some hours after this message came through.

TG: So you had learned, or at least Oswald had already been apprehended when this meeting between you and Director McCone took place.

RG: Yes.

TG: I see. The record that I have indicates that you met with President Johnson a number of times during the month of December, a rather frantic period of activity, I gather. Was Vietnam a topic for discussion at those meetings?

RG: It must have been at some of them, although my principal recollection of the meetings I had with Johnson during that month of December just before my departure was that they related to brainstorming ideas for the Great Society. The President would get together a group of us from all the different executive departments, and go around the table and elicit ideas as to what should be included in his domestic program. I don't recall specific discussions of problems relating to South Vietnam. By that time the President knew of my departure in the following January, but I do recall discussing various facets of the Great Society program during those sessions in the White House.

TG: Secretary McNamara went to Vietnam, I believe, that month of December, and apparently came back with some new views or changed views. Did he discuss any of this with you?

RG: No, not that I have any recollection of. Usually he kept me up to date. We had lunch together most days, often had breakfast together. I saw a great deal of him, but by that time it had been decided that Cy Vance would take my place as deputy secretary of defense on the twentieth of January, 1964, and I was in the process of turning over and phasing out, so I didn't emerge from that period with any clear recollection of any new thinking on McNamara's part before I left in January.

TG: Some people have suggested that that was a rather crucial trip, that he uncovered weaknesses in the military reporting or that he came back gloomy over the prospects of the new regime or something to that effect. He didn't comment about any of those things that you recall?

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 8

RG: No, I had known his reservations about General [Paul] Harkins and his reservations about the whole command setup, having so much of the communications traffic flow through CINCPAC and Honolulu, and the fact that we had so many lines of communication. I mean after all, the CIA had its direct communication; the State Department had its, McNamara went out himself a number of times and in addition, of course, the Joint Chiefs either directly or usually through CINCPAC kept getting messages from Harkins. McNamara had only gone along with the appointment of Harkins on the strong recommendation of General Taylor, in whom Secretary McNamara had great confidence. But he was not satisfied with the kind of intelligence--I'm speaking generally now, not technically--that he was getting, and as I say, he had definite reservations about the lines of communication and command authority.

TG: What reservations had he about General Harkins?

RG: He was just not impressed either by Harkins' record or by the personal attributes of the man when he saw him. He just didn't think he was strong enough, and he just didn't appeal to McNamara. McNamara had reservations about some of the Chiefs; he was high on [David] Shoup. He was high on Taylor, as I've said, very high on Taylor, he thought generally well of "Bus" Wheeler, General [Earle] Wheeler, he was not keen on [Curtis] LeMay and on [George] Anderson, particularly after the Cuban missile crisis, and neither of those generals were reappointed at the conclusion of their initial terms. Harkins, like Westmoreland, never elicited great enthusiasm on the part of McNamara or myself, for that matter, to the extent that when they called on me and I went to meetings with them, my impressions were not that they were the strongest kind of military commanders to put into this very touchy situation.

TG: It's rather surprising then that General Taylor was so insistent that General Harkins go out?

RG: Well, General Taylor was a person of very strong views. I think he was having problems enough in coordinating the three or even four services that were involved. When they finally agreed on Harkins--army, navy, air force and marines--he felt it was more important to get on with somebody who the military had agreed on than to go back and try to find some other officer. And he must have had--I'm just hypothesizing--confidence himself in Harkins at that point. In any case, it was on his recommendation that Harkins was sent out there, and both President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara went along with that.

TG: General Harkins' letter of appointment is a very sweeping sort of document. I don't know if you recall that.

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 9

RG: No, I don't.

TG: It makes him virtually independent as chief of MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group], and I've heard that General Taylor wrote that letter. Do you know anything of that?

RG: No, I don't.

TG: Was there discussion of the quality of the military reporting coming from Vietnam? I know that the journalists and especially in the New York Times were calling into serious question the accuracy of that reporting.

RG: McNamara has told me subsequently that he placed his principal reliance on information that came to him through the CIA rather than through the military channels. He didn't have the confidence in military-generated intelligence that he did have in the agency. He read them all; saw them all, but he's indicated to me that his principal reliance was on intelligence that came from the CIA.

TG: I see. Do you call the meeting that you had with the President on January 20 of 1964? This would have been shortly before you left.

RG: It was the day I left and it was simply a farewell visit and luncheon which the President accorded me as I left. We were alone, both for a swim--although Jack Valenti was around the pool edge--and then the luncheon the President and I had alone. The only substantive matter I recall that came up was what to do about General LeMay. The President asked me how I thought he should handle LeMay's departure, he knowing that McNamara wasn't going to recommend LeMay for another term. I suggested that some kind of a mission be found for LeMay; send him off on an inspection of U.S. Air Force bases and perhaps an allied air installation, something that would keep him occupied and not making any statements to the press about how he differed with McNamara and maybe with Johnson. I've forgotten whether the President ever did any such thing, but I gave him that suggestion at one point during that meeting on the twentieth. But the rest of the time it was just a courtesy visit with reminiscences and so forth about our past association.

TG: LeMay had been sort of a contentious member of the Joint Chiefs, had he not?

RG: Yes, he was a very single-minded man and he suffered from the handicap of not hearing very well, and he didn't want to use a hearing aid, so much of what went on at our regular meetings, that is to say McNamara's and my regular meetings with the Joint Chiefs once a week, he didn't clue to, he didn't get. But he always stuck to the same line, whether he was advising President Kennedy for an air strike against Cuba during the Cuban missile

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 10

crisis or whether he was advising the bombing of North Vietnam or air strikes against Laos. He was always for military solutions of a fairly drastic nature, and McNamara found it very difficult to reason with him and he didn't want him to be reappointed. LeMay was a very fine officer. I had known him going way back to my days as under secretary of the air force in the Korean War. He was a first-rate commander and a very able chief of SAC [Strategic Air Command], but he really wasn't cut out to be in the role of a principal adviser to the secretary of defense and to the president. He was a field commander, not a strategist and thinker like General Taylor was.

TG: The hearing problem is intriguing. I'd heard the same thing attributed to General Taylor. Is that true?

RG: Not in those days. General [Lyman] Lemnitzer I think had some hearing problems. Most of the military I think as a matter of pride didn't want to appear to have to rely on hearing aids. They felt that denigrated or detracted from their standing. So sometimes we had to get along without complete intercommunication.

TG: Did you have to pretend not to notice that this was happening?

RG: Maybe we didn't always pretend as well as we might have.

TG: I see.

One of the often-heard comments about President Johnson was that he lacked President Kennedy's feel, for want of a better word, for foreign affairs, that he was unsophisticated about the world. In your observation, how much truth attaches to that?

RG: As a generalization it's only partly true, because going back to my experience with Johnson when he was the majority leader and chairman of the Military Preparedness Subcommittee of the Senate during the Korean War, he showed a capacity for grasping the issues in foreign affairs to the extent that his own personal interest was drawn. In going back to the Korean War and continuing right through his term of office and his deep involvement in Vietnam, he certainly was sensitive to the issues in the Far East.

On the other hand, he didn't have the same interest or the same exposure or sensitivity about NATO problems and problems in the European theater. For example, when he came into office there were two major proposals on the table, as far as the United States and its relations with NATO and the NATO allies were concerned. One was the multilateral force which had been initiated during the Kennedy Administration, and which was in the process of being sold to some of the NATO governments. That project languished primarily for lack of presidential support. Incidentally, I'm not sure that President Kennedy would have supported it right down to the hilt. It may have fallen

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 11

partly from its own weight, because it was not a real star in my observation. In any case, Johnson didn't have the interest in that.

There was another project that I was very much involved in [that] started under President Kennedy's administration, which was to try to create something like a special relationship with the French, with the de Gaulle government similar to what had gone on for many years in nuclear weapons matters between the U.S. and the United Kingdom. I had, with Mac Bundy's assistance, cleared with the appropriate senators in the atomic energy area and also in the Armed Services Committees our suggesting to de Gaulle that we would give him the technology, give the French the technology to build a nuclear-powered submarine. This would have saved the French years of effort and many billions of francs. That proposal had been broached to the French; in fact, I discussed it myself with Defense Minister Messmer and briefly with President de Gaulle in the early fall of 1963. That project got dropped once the assassination had occurred and President Johnson took over, because all his attention was being focused on the Far East and Vietnam. So I'm saying that I don't think that comment is a universal truth. I think it just depends on the area of the world you're talking about.

TG: Speaking of de Gaulle, were there any complications regarding his attitude toward Vietnam during your tour?

RG: I wasn't involved in them or aware of them. I think generally my contacts with the French ambassador in the United States, Pierre Messmer, and others I got to know in Paris was a mixed one. After all, the French had had a lot of experience, some of it bad, in Indochina and Southeast Asia, and I think they were torn between hoping our experience would validate their own lack of success on one hand, and on the other hand of holding the line against further communist encroachment in Southeast Asia. But I don't recall anything about de Gaulle's personal attitude; it never was expressed to me during the few times I met with him.

TG: I know later he was sort of an irritant because of his constantly plumping for a neutralized Southeast Asia, and this was regarded as not the time to talk about a neutralization procedure.

Now, you met with President Johnson after you left government, twice, according to the diary in the Library. Do you recall what those occasions were about?

RG: Well, one occasion was I went down to pay a call on him in connection with a visitation which I had set up for a group called Recording for the Blind. Johnson asked me to come to see him. As a matter of fact, that picture up there of him and me was taken at that time.

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 12

TG: Well, that looks like the Oval Office.

RG: It was. And he drew me aside from the gathering in the Cabinet Room with all these representatives of this Recording for the Blind outfit, and we went in and had a visit there. The next occasion, I think, was in connection with his appointing me to head up this task force or commission to arrest the spread of nuclear weapons. I got a call from Mac Bundy late in 1964--either it was November or December-- asking if I would undertake to bring together a group and examine into this question and come up with a recommendation to the President. So I think that December 1 meeting had to do with that task force on nuclear proliferation. Then I met with him twice after that; once on the seventh of December. That was with a group of staff people, Spurge M. Keeney and Mac Bundy and others. And then we made our report, that is to say the task force report, on the twenty-first day of January, 1965, which I remember very clearly because the President had been up most of the night before at inauguration balls and I wondered at his powers of concentration when he had to come in and hear this very complicated subject discussed at length in the Cabinet Room at twelve o'clock on the day after the inauguration.

TG: Well, how did he do? Did he--?

RG: He did very well. He showed no signs of what had happened to him during the preceding twenty-four hours, and we had a session of an hour and a half or more in which, beside hearing me, he went around the table and heard from people like Jack McCloy and Arthur Dean and other members of the task force who were not given to brevity. He sat through this, asked questions, and much later he did embrace the conclusions of the task force. I think it was at the UN in June he made a speech on the subject out in San Francisco [at the] gathering of the United Nations.

TG: Had you gone to any of the inaugural celebrations?

RG: No, I had not.

TG: That perhaps was a working night for you, was it?

RG: That's right. I was preparing for my presentation, because the Vice President was there and I recall before the President came in, I was sitting next to Humphrey and Humphrey said, "Let me see the report." And as Johnson came in the room, Humphrey quickly pushed the report over to me so the President wouldn't see that he had had an advance view of it. The President made it perfectly plain he didn't intend anybody to have copies of the report but himself, and that excluded Humphrey as well as his other aides. He clamped right down as far as security was concerned and kept the thing in his own

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 13

cognizance. There wasn't going to be anything said about it until he had made up his mind.

TG: Well, there are reports that he was sensitive about being upstaged.

RG: No question, and he wasn't going to be upstaged on this one. If there was going to be any news made, he was going to make it in his own due time.

TG: Mr. Gilpatric, let me ask, in the brief time that had Vietnam affairs to deal with, were there any turning points, any significant errors made that in retrospect you would have done differently, or rather would have seen come out differently?

RG: My own conclusion, looking back on those days, has been that we were on a downhill slippery slope and were not very imaginative or very wise in finding ways to arrest this process. We didn't serve the President of the country as well as we might have, because I think it should have been possible for us to extricate ourselves from the depth of our involvement that occurred later. Now if I say to myself, "At what stage and in what way would this process have been arrested?" I find it hard to be specific. I just have a general sense that we should have been able to avoid what happened in Vietnam, and I'm just speaking of course of the period prior to January 20, 1964 when I departed the scene. What could have been done after that, I don't know. I saw McNamara from time to time. When the question of a successor to Lodge came up as ambassador, McNamara called me up for ideas and I said, "Look, if you want some sacrificial goat to go out there, I'll go out. I'll leave my law practice and come back." I subsequently heard the President was gratified--I wasn't the only one that volunteered, but--not that I had any great, magic solutions in mind. Anyway, that's the general conclusion I've come to in my own mind as I've looked back on those days.

TG: This was when Ambassador Lodge left after his first tour in 1964?

RG: Yes. The President was casting about and there were, as I say, a number of people who volunteered. It wasn't a very attractive post as of that time, but it was the general feeling that the President should be supported, and while many of us had reservations as time went on about [policy]--including McNamara himself by the end of 1967 or 1968--we didn't feel it at that stage.

TG: The reservations grew as the situation deteriorated, I guess.

RG: Yes, and as it became evident that there really wasn't any military solution that those of us like myself, who had been in the military but in a civilian capacity, could discern.

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 14

TG: Now, you've said that--I'm thinking back to your discussion of the August 24 telegram--where you said in effect that Defense simply wasn't taking a position, that you'd sign off more or less acknowledging that this was a White House/State Department operation. How did you feel personally? How did you feel about Diem?

RG: See, I had never met the man; I had never been out there. My knowledge of him was all secondhand. Lansdale knew him; Lansdale thought that he was the best of the Vietnamese and that his administration was our best hope. I think Nolting felt that way. On the other hand, the increasingly pervasive influence of his brother-in-law, Nhu, was very disturbing and people began to sort of first have their doubts and then the doubts became fears as to whether Diem could hack it. But I just never met the man; having only heard about him indirectly through seeing the dispatches from various quarters, I just didn't have a really strong conviction of my own.

TG: Lansdale went out there, I believe, in 1961, wasn't it? The spring of 1961? And made a rather gloomy report when he came back. Were you familiar with that?

RG: No, I don't recall that.

TG: Perhaps it was the spring of 1960. I may be a year off.

RG: I don't think he went out there. You see, the task force deliberations took roughly two months, from March until May 1961, and Lansdale was with me all that time. Nobody went out to Vietnam. After the task force report, Vice President Johnson went out accompanied by a whole retinue of people, of course, including Kennedy's brother-in-law, Steve Smith, and various State and military people. I don't think Lansdale went then. But twenty years after the event I'm not clear about the details.

TG: He did go with the Taylor-Rostow mission though, as I recall.

RG: In the summer of 1961?

TG: I think it was the fall; I think it would have been September or October.

RG: Could be. I just don't have a fix on that.

TG: Are there any great misconceptions in the interpretations that have been put upon our experience in Vietnam by the popularizers of that period? I'm thinking of people like some of the New York Times reporters, like Neil Sheehan, David Halberstam, Peter Arnett.

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 15

RG: I'm really not the one to assess these different views. I've read much of what's been written. I read Hilsman's memoirs and I've read The Best and the Brightest and The Pentagon Papers and I've talked to McNamara a good deal, but I don't emerge from that third-hand exposure with any deep convictions other than the one I mentioned earlier. Those of us who were advising the President, to whom he looked for advice, should, I think, have been able to have found a way to avoid what subsequently happened. But I've never figured out how that could have been done.

TG: How do you react to the great objection to pulling out which says that the President couldn't afford to lose Southeast Asia the way the President in the forties had lost China?

RG: Well, I don't think it would be the question of our losing it. We never had it.

TG: I agree, but that didn't affect what happened to the Democrats in 1952.

RG: Well, I was around, of course, in the government at that point during the Korean War, and I know all the criticism of Secretary [Dean] Acheson from having drawn a line which excluded Korea from our area of concern and interest. I've always been a skeptic about the extent to which we should treat portions of Southeast Asia as matters of vital concern to us. I don't think we understood the history or the culture or the people. I don't think we were equipped to come in and establish the kind of a democratic regime that we like to see in places where communism otherwise might secure a foothold. I don't think we belonged there and I think going way back to Roosevelt and Eisenhower we should have resisted the efforts to involve us, all of which had good justification: helping allies, helping peoples resisting communist encroachments and expansion. I don't think we had any particular genius that enabled us to solve these basic problems in that part of the world, and I think we would have been better out of it.

TG: Was Southeast Asia then not as crucial to our interests as was represented at the time?

RG: Opinions vary. Obviously after the Korean War experience, when we'd made such a major effort and expended so much in the way of lives and riches to preserve South Korea from takeover by the communists, feelings ran very high and in many quarters. We were trying to guide the emergence of Japan back into the western-oriented world. We were concerned about the Philippines, and we had all kinds of economic interests throughout that area, including Indonesia. So no question that the U.S. had a lot at stake in the Far East, as it does today. Whether that stake is of such that we should do as we have done in Europe, become a major presence militarily as well as commercially and diplomatically, is I think a question of which there can be two views and obviously the way some people have criticized our pulling back from complete support of Nationalist China and the Taiwan government, we'd always be criticized if we pulled back from

Roswell Gilpatric -- Interview I -- 16

supporting anti-communist elements in other areas. But we're out of Indochina now, pretty much, and I don't think our interests have been gravely impaired by that.

TG: Well, of course, two of the so-called dominoes have fallen, but the others apparently have not. That may be the difference, too.

RG: Yes, that's right.

TG: Someone has suggested that the reason the other dominoes have not fallen is that we've bought them time. Have you got any opinion on that?

RG: No, I don't. I feel much more comfortable in my judgments about other subjects than I do the Far East. I spend so little time out there. I did go to Japan a number of times both during the Korean War and during President Kennedy's administration. So I have some views about Japan and Korea, of course, because I was there a good deal, too, when I was under secretary of the air force. But other than those two areas I'm far from being an expert.

TG: Mr. Gilpatric, is there anything you would like to add about Vietnam?

RG: No, I think I've said all that I'm in a position to. As I wrote you, my experience from May of 1961 on was pretty much secondhand except the respects you've covered in your questions. I really don't have anything to add to the record.

TG: Very well.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Roswell L. Gilpatric

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, Roswell L. Gilpatric of New York City, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on November 2, 1982 at New York City and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

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

Signed by Roswell L. Gilpatric on November 7, 1989.

Accepted by Don Wilson, Archivist of the United States, on November 24, 1989.

Original Deed of Gift on File at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2313 Red River, Austin, TX 78705.

Accession Number: 90-2