INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 10, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN A. GRONOUSKI

INTERVIEWER: Paige E. Mulhollan

PLACE: Washington D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: I'm sure you don't have a good idea of exactly where we stopped; we got you into the ambassador's position. I suppose the key activity of your ambassadorship was the various activities you conducted in connection with the several peace-feeler initiatives in connection with Vietnam. Did that start almost immediately with the [Averell] Harriman visit in Christmas of 1965?

G: Yes. Actually I arrived in Poland on the thirtieth of November. And on the eleventh of December we had a dedication of a hospital we had built, with about eleven, twelve, fifteen congressmen there. And on the fifteenth, I believe, we had our first China talks.

(Interruption)

At any rate, getting back to my arrival in Poland, we had the China meetings on the fifteenth of December, and I guess this doesn't have any particular relevance because I went to Paris and had a session with Dean Rusk but I don't think there was anything dealing with other than just the general sweep of foreign policy involved here.

At any rate, I can't remember the date but it was somewhere around the twentieth of December, I believe, I was on a visit to my consulate up in Poznan, and I got word at 2:00 a.m. that Averell Harriman was on his way over, and could we get clearances?

M: Get clearances at 2:00 a.m. in the morning?

G: He was in the air already. So my DCM [deputy chief of mission] was on the phone with Mr. [Mieczyslaw] Sieradski all night getting clearances and did get them. And I took a 5:00 a.m. train, got back to Warsaw at 10:00 a.m., and met Harriman's plane at eleven, or ten-thirty. We went to the office and had a very short session with Mr. Harriman and the staff he had with him, and then went immediately to see Mr. [Alam] Rapacki--I think we had a twelve o'clock meeting that noon set up with Rapacki. Now the purpose of this meeting obviously had to do with eliciting the help of the Poles to utilize the bombing pause--

M: The bombing pause had already been announced at this point?

G: The bombing pause had been announced at this point. To utilize the bombing pause to get Hanoi to come to the conference table. And we had a fairly long, about a two, two-and-a-half hour session, and had lunch with the Poles, Mr. Rapacki--

M: He was the foreign minister at that time?

G: Foreign Minister Rapacki. Mr. [Jerzy] Michalowski, who is now ambassador to the United States but was then their key person in the--he was what they called the director general in the Foreign Ministry and was key in this whole Vietnam question because he had served on the ICC and was very high on the list of those who were knowledgeable about this area of the world--of the Polish Foreign Ministry, and others whom I can't immediately recall.

But at any rate, essentially what Harriman's mission was, was simply to get across to the Poles that we genuinely wanted to sit down at the table, as we were calling upon them as we were going to call on other governments around the world to try to convince

Hanoi to come to the conference table with us anywhere in the world, and that we were just soliciting the Polish government's help on this. There was a great deal of back and forth discussion as to what we really wanted, and what we really wanted them to do. And they, the Poles, were suggesting that we put in writing what we wanted and they would be happy to convey the message. Mr. Harriman said over and over again, he made the point that we weren't going to put anything in writing per se; that what we wanted him on this trip to do, and in these discussions to do, was to get to the Poles the feeling and the attitude and the impression of just what our interests were and what our credibility was on this thing--

M: On the subject of--

G: --on the subject of wanting negotiations, wanting to move on toward peace, and that this was not the kind of thing that they could convey through a message. If they were going to convey it at all, they could most effectively convey it by getting the sense and the meanings of our conversations and our discussions and convey that sense of meaning to Hanoi. Of course there was, I can't remember in detail now all of the elements of the conversations, but the Poles pressed us pretty hard in terms of our good intentions, in terms of the question of whether or not we were giving an ultimatum to Hanoi, and assuring us that if we were giving an ultimatum it wasn't going to be effective because Hanoi was not going to buckle under to an ultimatum. Essentially [they said] that our bombing stop had to be with no strings attached and [they were] trying to make the point that it had to be indefinite and that it couldn't have a time limit on it, that it had to be a unilateral act on our part. Mr. Harriman of course would not give assurance that we'd never resume the bombing, but pointed out, as only he could with the great good will that he has in that part of the world, that this was a

matter that he personally assured them was something that we were doing with the best of intentions and the best of good will, and that we were dead serious about wanting to get negotiations started and we were dead serious about wanting the Poles to use their good offices and help us.

At any rate, after considerable discussion of how our point of view was going to be conveyed, the meeting adjourned with no assurance that the Poles were going to do anything. But interestingly enough at about seven-thirty that evening I got a call at the residence, and it was Jerzy Michalowski who had been not the interpreter but one of the experts at the meeting. He asked to come over and see me at the residence, me and Harriman.

M: Harriman was still there?

G: Harriman was staying overnight with us. We were waiting for further word on whether we were going to go in session again, meet with them again; at this point we didn't know. Also at this point Harriman didn't know where he was going.

M: He didn't know his next stop on his itinerary?

G: He didn't know his next stop. He thought it was going to be Hungary, I believe. But I don't think he ever got to Hungary. I think it was to Yugoslavia next. He was intending to go to Hungary, but he never got clearance to go. That will have to be checked by some other--I know he was wondering where the devil he was going to go next.

M: Ended up going around the world.

G: Yes, he was prepared, I'll tell you.

At any rate, Michalowski got to my house at eight o'clock as planned, and he sat down with Harriman and myself, and hands us a piece of paper--a couple of pages--where he had written out his interpretation of what Harriman wanted conveyed to Hanoi by the Polish government. He said, "Now, I know that you didn't want to write it out, but I want to make sure that they're not conveying something that conflicts with what you have in mind. I'm not asking you to sign this or to make this your statement, I just want to informally have you read it and if there is any egregious error let me know."

Both Harriman and I read it, he and I talked a bit, neither of us saw anything wrong with it. It seemed to be an honest and straight forward reflection and a good condensation of what Harriman had expressed in the meeting that afternoon. So we both said that while this does not represent a statement from us--and he agreed to this readily-- nonetheless it wouldn't make us unhappy if this was the kind of thing that he conveyed to Hanoi. We both thought this was quite extraordinary, because the Poles were obviously going out of their way to get straight what they were going to pass along. We didn't know this at the time, but the next day Michalowski went to Hanoi and was there I think for eighteen days, and in my judgment did what he could to convince Hanoi to use the bombing pause for purposes of developing peace negotiations.

M: Do you think the Poles were pretty well convinced that our attempts were as they were represented?

G: No question in my mind at that time that they were. They expressed some doubts at some later date, but at the time there's no question in my mind that the Poles were--I might say that [Wladyslaw] Gomulka was very difficult to get to in Poland, hardly any diplomats ever

get to see him, he played his role behind the scene. So I used the occasion to ask Harriman, "I don't know if I'll ever get to see this guy," and so I asked Harriman to try to get to see him so I'd have the chance.

And Harriman, as we broke up the meeting on this afternoon, said that he'd known Mr. Gomulka for a long time, ever since 1945, and he would like to have Mr. Rapacki convey his good wishes to him, and if possible he would like to do it himself if that would be convenient. And we immediately got an answer just within a few hours that Gomulka would see us at nine o'clock the next morning.

So Harriman and I the next morning spent two hours in Gomulka's office. It's the only time except at cocktail hours shaking hands and that sort of thing that I had the opportunity to get a firsthand look at Gomulka. And that conversation started out with great pleasantries and then got very tough.

A little aside on Harriman, who fits into this overall picture I should think. Gomulka had gone into about a twenty-minute diatribe against the United States for one thing after another. Harriman had mentioned something about our aid programs, and he was interpreting our aid programs as another example of our attempt to dominate countries imperialistically, and so on. And this went on and on, it might have been a half-hour or more that Gomulka just kept talking. He is a very interesting guy, this Gomulka, in that he has got his pitch; he's pretty articulate in making his pitch; however he has blinders on and doesn't see the rest of the world except with a very distorted outlook. But at any rate Gomulka was making one point after another, and Harriman was sitting next to me kind of nodding, and I got very nervous because I thought, "Gee, what if Gomulka stops and this

guy's sleeping?" And just as I was about to give him a nudge with my elbow, Gomulka said something, I can't remember what it was, all of a sudden Harriman jumped up as bright and alert as could be and said, "What was that? What was that figure?"

M: He had been listening very closely.

G: He had been listening very carefully all along. But you know he has got one bad ear, and probably shutting his eyes and slouching down as he did, probably gives him better grasp for what's said than otherwise.

But at any rate Gomulka kept this up for some time, saying very disparaging things about our country. All of a sudden he came to a pause for a breath presumably, and Harriman sat up straight and with his finger jabbing continuously for about five minutes, each time coming within an eighth of an inch of Gomulka's nose, he just went into one long rebuttal, saying, "Now let me tell you a few things. You've been sitting here running down my country." Then he went on and said such things as, "Why don't you give your people some freedom? What are you afraid of? Why don't you let them vote on who runs this country? You won't because you're afraid, you won't give them freedom." And it went on and on like this for about five minutes, very tough. It gives an insight into Harriman, because you know there are all varieties of opinions on people like Harriman. But Harriman showed himself in my presence both with the Poles and obviously in this case with Gomulka to be a very compassionate, a very understanding, but when the chips are down a very tough old gentleman and a very bright old gentleman.

M: He has had plenty of experience at that--

G: But this experience with Gomulka was certainly enlightening to me in that he just took Gomulka over the coals, and Gomulka took it. And after it was all over he said, "You just don't understand Poland."

M: Once this initiative passed on and Harriman went on and the bombing resumed, were there any further uses of Poland for peace initiatives prior to the more or less well known Marigold initiative in the late part of 1966?

G: Well, I might say that Michalowski, unknown to us, did go over to Hanoi; he stopped in the Soviet Union and China, Moscow on the way and I think Peking on the way back, I'm not sure. But he did make all three capitals, spent a lot of time in Hanoi, carried our message. It was reported by one of my ambassadorial colleagues, Sir George Clutton, the British ambassador, Sir George Clutton, ambassador to Poland for six years ending some time in 1967, I believe. But anyway he was there when I came and left while I was there. Sir George was the dean of the diplomatic corps and knew Mr. Michalowski very well on a personal basis, got along very well with him. It is reported to me that he chatted with Michalowski the day he got back, and Michalowski's first comment was, "God damn those Chinese!" which is an insight into perhaps what might have happened in terms of pressures in Hanoi.

I think the Poles were trying very much, and I don't think they would have if the Soviets hadn't approved of it. I think they were trying very much to get something started. They weren't on our side at any time, but they were trying to get something started for reasons known best to themselves and the Soviets, but did not succeed. And I gathered

from this little chance comment that Michalowski made that perhaps it was the obstruction of the Chinese that created the problem.

I might say that there was a little period there on Saturday before the bombing [pause] ended--I think the bombing [pause] ended on Monday. I was in Bonn; I had left for a couple of days, and I've always regretted that I did. I don't know why I went anymore, it was to see George McGhee about something. But just before I went away I had gone over to see the Foreign Minister earlier that week, the week before the Monday when the bombing [pause] halted. I had gone to see Foreign Minister Rapacki to convey to him from my government the thought that, "We just cannot hold out this bombing pause much longer unless we get some response."

M: You said the Monday before the bombing stopped?

G: No.

M: Before it started again.

G: The bombing resumed on a Monday, I believe, and it was in the week before it resumed I was instructed to go over and to convey to Rapacki the strong impression that we were going to have to start the bombing again unless they could give us some assurance. I remember making a personal appeal to Rapacki, whom I had gotten to know fairly well by then, saying that, "Mr. Rapacki, you must realize the tremendous pressures on the President of the United States at this point; there are many who think that this bombing pause was a mistake in the first place; that there are great pressures from many sides for him to resume it. There are also a good many people who would like it to continue, but they are fast losing out as we run into over a month now of a bombing pause with not one iota of

response. I would like you to give me something to take back to my President to offset the tremendous pressure he's getting to resume the bombing." I said to him that I didn't feel it would take much because I think the inclination of the President was to hold the options open for peace, but that if I could take nothing back then clearly the possibility of it continuing for any length of time was pretty slim as the note indicated. He couldn't give me anything; he could suggest only that in his personal judgment we should keep it open some time longer, these things take time, and we would be making a sad mistake if we resumed the bombing.

At any rate, when I was in Bonn I think on the Saturday before the Monday when we resumed the bombing, there was enough indication going around that it was pretty clear that the bombing was going to resume. I don't know how you feel this in the air, but you're getting all kinds of messages and you're hearing from the Poles; you're hearing from all kinds of sources. And it looked pretty clearly that the bombing was going to shortly. And the Poles obviously got a very clear reading on this, as anyone I suppose in Hanoi and with people in South and North Vietnam would have gotten. At any rate, they asked me to see the Foreign Minister at 10:00 a.m. that morning, Saturday morning; this was Saturday before the Monday when the bombing resumed. I was not there and my chargé, who was Mr. [Albert W.] Sherer, who is now ambassador to Togo, whose name I guess has just been withdrawn in this group but I think will be put back in, he's career, he has no political. . . . But anyway, Bud Sherer went over at 10:00 a.m.

And what had happened is that Ho Chi Minh had released to a good many countries, including the British and the Poles, a statement on its position, and this statement was

interpreted by the Poles to indicate a significant change in Hanoi's position. I'm having trouble pulling out of the air now this particular change, but what it had to do with is the conditions under which Hanoi would negotiate, including the Four Points of the [National] Liberation Front and the five points of somebody else. And there was one formulation, which we'll have to check the records on, which they indicated was significantly different, and said that it would be a great mistake for us to resume the bombing until we were sure that their interpretation was wrong. That they thought it was right; that this really did mean a shift in Ho Chi Minh's position and one that harbored well for the development of peace negotiations.

This was duly reported by Bud Sherer, a competent foreign service officer, but without any recommendations. I think if I had been there I would have made a fairly strong pitch to the President to take Rapacki seriously on this; of course I had no official knowledge at that point the bombing was going to be renewed, but I certainly had the impression it was. And I think I might have strongly recommended. Now whether or not this would have had any effect is problematical. I doubt that it would have even though when I got back Sunday I was very disturbed that the whole thing had passed without my having gotten in my licks.

It turned out that they did take this quite seriously back in Washington, and that they had the British check it out.

M: You said that the British also got the announcement as well as the Poles?

G: Well, several countries did. But the State Department, when they got our message on Saturday indicating Rapacki's interpretation of Ho Chi Minh's note, queried the British as to

their interpretation. One of the problems here is this was Vietnamese translated into French translated into English, and this was one of the real problems. And there was one word that meant something in French, and maybe it wasn't translated properly. Because apparently the Poles and the Americans and the Brits all had little different variations in the translation. Again, the details of this are on the books in a lot of places.

But at any rate, the Brits apparently checked with their Moscow office and had the British minister, the number-two man, call on the Hanoi chargé and ask him if this was significant, and the answer was it was not significant, that this play on words was really just a play on words and nothing more than that. And the bombing resumed on Monday.

When this number-two British man in Moscow came to Warsaw as ambassador some time later--his name was Brimelow, Ambassador [Thomas] Brimelow, and he still is there--I had occasion one time to talk to him about this. And I said, "My understanding is that this was checked out in the British embassy in Moscow." And Brimelow said, "Yes, I was the one that did it. And in my mind there was no question as far as Hanoi was concerned that this point the Poles were making was meaningless." I say that because Brimelow is an extraordinarily able fellow, by the way, and probably the leading British kremlinologist and student of communism in the Foreign Service; I should trust his judgment on these things quite highly.

I might say that the Poles subsequently continually harangued me with the proposition that we had asked to use their good offices, and that they had religiously gone to Hanoi for us, and then when they came up with a suggestion, instead of asking them to

check it out, which they would have been very happy to do, we went to a chargé in Moscow.

M: Some other nation's chargé.

G: They could have checked it, he said, right with Ho Chi Minh or [Pham Van] Dong or one of the top guys back in Hanoi; they were willing to do so. The fact that we went to a minor official, North Vietnamese official, up in Moscow to find out about this was just ridiculous because obviously he wouldn't be in on the top thinking of the Hanoi government. And I think he made a fairly significant point with me.

I argued the case as any good diplomat does, but it was hard to be enthusiastic because I think probably we would have been better advised to ask Warsaw to check it out before we resumed the bombing.

M: The higher you check it out, the more certain you are that you get the facts.

G: And also we had involved Warsaw so intimately in this, and there was some value in maintaining that kind of contact. Of course once the order goes out, these are very difficult to change in the military field. But my own inclination would have been that we would have been wiser had we delayed the resumption of bombing for a few days and asked the Poles to check with Hanoi. It probably would have come just as it did, resuming the bombing three or four days later, but these are never-nevers that you can't answer; and I think it justified to a degree, or at least gave substance to those who argued that we didn't walk that last step. God knows, we didn't bomb for thirty-seven days. This was a long time, and we got no response whatsoever. And my own feeling is the Poles were grasping at straws, and there was no meaning to this. I think this is probably borne out in time. And

that an extension of the bombing [pause] and asking the Poles to check out the matter would have had no long range impact, except that it probably would have perhaps had some impact on the Poles themselves as to our seriousness. Because, after all, these people always question our motives; we're a major power in the world. Not only do our enemies or our non-allies, I'd rather say, check our motives, but also do our friends. I think though this is an interesting sidelight because I feel that the Poles were genuinely trying, for what motives I don't know, to get something started at that time, and we might very well have given them a little more consideration when they specifically called us over that morning.

At any rate, we, Mr. Michalowski and I, had many discussions over the next several months on how to get the talks started. It was the old run-around. He would say that nothing will happen until the bombing stops, and I would say, "If the bombing stops, what will happen?" He'd say, "I can't assure you of that, but I know nothing will happen until it stops." And I saw him quite frequently both formally and on social occasions; I got to know him pretty well personally, and we never ceased discussing Vietnam and trying--I was always trying to get from Hanoi some indication of some response. I said to him many, many times over a two-year period that I had perfect confidence that if they could give me their word--

M: The Poles' word.

G: [If] the Poles could give me their word that a stop in bombing would result in some specific significant reaction on the part of Hanoi aimed toward peace that I could get President Johnson to stop the bombing in twenty-four hours time.

M: Did you have some assurance of this, or were you just confident of it?

G: Just from the way it went. No, I didn't have any assurance of that in black and white; nobody ever said that to me. But I am just as confident now saying it as I was then. I was confident enough that I was risking my reputation with a foreign power that I was assigned to. Because I think I knew the Vietnam thinking of our government pretty well; I had been very well briefed on it just simply because of the China talks and because of the fact that Poland was a member of the International Control Commission along with Canada and India. I had talked to the President about it, not in specific terms but in general terms of what our objectives were. I had talked to Dean Rusk a lot about it, Bundy and others. I felt that I had a pretty good reading on what we would do, and I felt very clearly that if there were some definitive response in the offing and that the Poles would so assure us, that if I couldn't do it by telegram I would fly home and convince them to stop it. There's no question in my mind that I could have as I sit here today.

M: That's pretty good insight, too.

G: But I could never get that assurance all the time I was there, and it wasn't for want of trying because I felt that this was the important thing I was doing in Poland--trying to find some key to solving the Vietnam war. And I had perfect confidence at this time, as I have ever since, that President Johnson and Dean Rusk had a single-track mind, that they wanted to find a way to stop this war. I don't buy the criticism that they were subjected to in terms of motives; that they might have made mistakes is another question, but certainly the motives were there. I don't think any mistake they made probably, such as what I think was a mistake in not continuing the bombing pause for a bit, I don't think anything that I would label as a mistake in all the period I was involved was a critical mistake in terms of causing

something not to happen that might have happened. And I think it rests on the proposition that all the times that the Poles were trying in both this and the other major time which I'll get to immediately, all the times that the Poles were trying to find some basis for getting Hanoi to the table, the Poles, I think, were doing it pretty much on their own rather than having any authority vested in them by Hanoi.

At any rate, nothing happened in Warsaw, and nothing was happening to my knowledge of any great significance until on December 3, [1966] I became aware of the Marigold operation, which of course had been going on since June in Saigon. There was from time to time of course some indications that talks were going on here, there, and elsewhere, but this was more in the innuendo--I had learned so much from the Poles, you know. Michalowski, whenever anything was going on that they were involved in, would at least give me some indication that something was going on, but he'd never tell me what it was, and neither would my government sometimes. So I felt kind of in between.

But at any rate I fully respect the high degree of secrecy that was maintained in Saigon all during this period from June to December because it was of the most sensitive type of discussions, and it would have been tragic if it had leaked at all.

At any rate on a Saturday night, I think, I got a flash or an intermediate came down to the office and I was told that--it was the third of December--I was likely to be called in by Rapacki on Monday, and probably would have a meeting with the North Vietnamese Ambassador on Tuesday to discuss the conditions under which negotiations would commence. And Sunday I got a whole raft of material that brought me up [to date]--no, I didn't get it Sunday. I got very damned little material Sunday, as I recall, pretty sketchy

outlines, some of the details. But when I did get a call Monday and went over to see Rapacki, the Poles were keeping it so secret that Michalowski asked me to his office, and he said, "Do you have any idea why I might want you over here?" And I said, well, I had some idea that I might want to see Rapacki because of some conversations going on in Saigon. He said, "Then I can tell you that Mr. Rapacki wants to see you."

At any rate Rapacki told me more than I knew about what was going on in Saigon, and I kept up a stiff upper lip and acted like I knew more than I knew.

M: Nodded your head knowingly.

G: And although some things I had to be real careful of because it was his interpretation; God knows whether he was making the right one or not. But at any rate, we talked about the possibilities of meeting the Ambassador from Hanoi the next day. I discussed with him at some length how we might do this to keep it highly secret. At this point I went over alone, I didn't let any of my staff know what was going on; for about ten days I did this, and it was very difficult. I was up every night. And sooner or later people started getting to know something was going on, but I had to be careful with the press and with my own staff because this was so highly secret at the time.

But at any rate, we had I think that day dropped some bombs near Hanoi, I think the bombs dropped on the third and the eleventh, if I can recall correctly.

M: There were two periods. They dropped I think on the second and fourth and again on the fourteenth. Two periods of two days when they dropped. I've forgotten the exact dates--I think the second and fourth.

G: Well, I think that first day was just to kind of brief me and to get me into the fold and ask some questions as to what we meant in these ten points that had been approved by Lodge. [They were] not written by him but approved by him-- [Janusz] Lewandowski's ten points; and particularly raising questions. On one point we had said that this would be open of course to interpretation by both sides and have to be negotiated. I had a long give-and-take with Rapacki on the fact that what two people say around the dinner table is misinterpreted very often, and obviously these would have to be negotiated. There was one other point--there were two points that Rapacki raised questions on, I can't remember what the other one was offhand.

But I left that day thinking that we were going to--let's see, this was the fifth, I think that we had already bombed. It must have been besides giving me the ground rules and raising some technical questions, the first time at any rate, and this was probably the first time, that he raised the question of the bombing. He said it in a very low keyed way, saying that, "After all, you must remember that these people live in Hanoi, the leaders live there, and if you're really thinking about negotiations, you shouldn't really be bombing right where they live!"

M: Did he say he was speaking for Hanoi on that?

G: Never did. In this whole discussion, this whole series of discussions from beginning to end, he never once said he was speaking for Hanoi. He always interpreted what he thought was Hanoi's position, or in some other way he was elliptical at all times. Even at one point where I went over there at my request sometime in the middle of all this discussion, I said, "Look, I've got to get back something to Washington that indicates what Hanoi feels, not

what the Poles feel. Is there something you can give me?" And he wouldn't give me anything. I went specially for it. He was very careful all the way through never to commit Hanoi. In retrospect I think the reason he was careful, aside from--well, whether this was the reason or not, I think one logical answer as to why he was careful was that Hanoi never did say anything specific. That's jumping my story, but this is part of my ultimate interpretation of what happened.

But at any rate, his first discussion of the bombing was on a relatively low key, didn't seem to scare me at all. I wasn't scared at all that this was standing in the way or frustrating the possibilities of talks. But he said in effect, "Now, look, let's be sensible. If you will convey to your President our feeling that this is not the wise thing to be doing at this point simply because these people live there and it makes an impression. You haven't been bombing Hanoi for a long time and all of a sudden to start bombing Hanoi at the same time you're on a peace offensive just doesn't make any sense."

At any rate we had almost daily meetings. Each day I pressed for the opportunity to sit down and talk to the Hanoi Ambassador, and each time the Hanoi Ambassador wasn't ready. Each time we would argue over some particular point in the American position, and each time I would in effect say, "Well, look, this is the sort of thing that that first meeting is all about, to hash these things out. Let's get Hanoi--the Ambassador, let's sit down, and in one meeting we can probably solve some of these problems." But at any rate, it never happened, and we were obviously being stalled. I think we were being stalled because the Poles couldn't get the thing to happen.

M: Were you prepared to talk over the ten-point thing with the Hanoi man?

G: After my first meeting on Monday with Rapacki, I made it pretty clear to Washington that I felt pretty much at a disadvantage. Then I started getting stuff by the reams, I mean to repeats of telegrams way back to June. And I was reading until I couldn't quit. So I got very well briefed. Of course I got briefing papers, and I got position papers, and everything else. I was ready on the sixth, I can tell you, to sit down and have the first discussions. And I was even more ready as time went on. So at any point, day or night, I would have met with them and entered into substantive discussions, substantive in the sense that the--I guess I shouldn't say substantive, procedural perhaps. The question really was how we should get these meetings started, and what are the ground rules, and what have you.

And I was prepared also, however, to discuss the substance of the ten points so that there was really an opportunity to get into substance if the other side were ready to do so. So actually it was more than procedural, what I was prepared to do. Of course if we had gotten started, I had an awful lot of problems because these were highly secret; I only had one man on my staff that could speak French effectively, and French was the--and if they really had gotten started, I'd probably have had to surreptitiously brought a couple of people over, a good French interpreter and someone from Washington who had been working day and night for months on this thing.

But at that point in time we didn't have to face that question, although ultimately I had some people working on some of these problems, such as what if the talks really got started and we've got fifty people coming in and five hundred press, you know.

Then the next bombing happened on the thirteenth, I believe. And I was called over, and Rapacki was genuinely angry, I felt; I mean, just very angry, saying that he had

over and over again--as he had--warned us that we shouldn't be bombing Hanoi, and now we did it again. And I think this was the only qualification to the generalization I made a minute ago, because at this point he said, "Hanoi has instructed us to stop these discussions, and we agree with Hanoi that if you're going to go on bombing the city of Hanoi, you obviously aren't acting in good faith. Perhaps the President is, but the military isn't, and somebody is undercutting him if he isn't doing it himself." And the pitch that we heard around here quite a bit, that the military might have been undercutting the President, was the pitch I got that day.

M: Had you been strongly advising in your cables back for them to by all means not resume?

G: I made the point every time that this was a serious issue. The record will show that I wrote at that point a very strong telegram--I'll have to check the timing on this sometime. But anyway let me make this other point first.

Of course I reported this conversation, and then I got a request back to go over and say to Rapacki that if these talks break down we'll hold you responsible. Well, I thought this was extraordinarily bad judgment and so instead of going over there I wired back saying so, and suggested some modification. At any rate they came back and instructed me to do so. I almost resigned my ambassadorship at that point by the way--at least it went through my mind--because I felt this was such an egregious error on Washington's part. But I went over and did it and as I could expect, as I anticipated, Rapacki absolutely hit the roof and ended the meeting. And I think only because of a pretty good personal relationship, I calmed him down and said, "Well, let me finish what I have to say," because I had some more positive things to say in the process that I hadn't quite said yet.

But it was a very bad situation. The reaction was as one could anticipate, and as I did anticipate. So then is when I think I wrote a very strong telegram back and addressed it to the President, saying in effect that we were losing an awful lot at this point, and that were we to stand as is, whatever be the effect on ultimate peace or war in Vietnam, we would lose the battle around the world for the opinion of everybody in the free world. [I said] that it was intolerable that these beginnings would end with our bombing in Hanoi, which one could find very little rationale for after all the emphasis that had been placed on it as an issue, and we were without any good logic putting ourselves in the most unfavorable light before the bar of world opinion. [I said] that we ought to immediately do several things and that I ought to receive instructions immediately to assure the Poles that we had ceased bombing Hanoi. I think there were two or three other things I said. I can't remember the total detail of this telegram, but it was a comment on the last meeting I had with Rapacki where he blew up, and it was in very strong language. I also asked to come home.

M: For consultation?

G: For consultation.

M: Not permanently?

G: Oh, no. I never did do that. You know, you think of that once in a while, but you still think you might have some effect--impact--if you stay on.

But any rate I felt very strongly about this, that it was a bad decision. At any rate, when I asked to come home, they said they didn't see any reason for it. I had asked to come home to discuss this whole—

M: The State Department did this? You said you sent the note to the President, and the State Department said there was no reason to come home?

G: Yes, I never did get a direct response from the President to any of my messages. They always came back through the State Department. I think it was the State Department, though, that--I don't think I asked the President to come home per se. I think I sent that to Dean Rusk--probably did--to argue my case.

At any rate, I was very shook when they told me that they didn't see any point of it. I suggested I think again that I thought there was a point to it, and then there was a silence for a couple of days. Then at eleven o'clock one night, I got a telegram which did make a concession saying that we would stop the bombing around Hanoi if Hanoi would do something else--stop shelling Saigon, I guess. Also I think about the same time I was authorized to come home, and I did go home the next day. I called the Foreign Office and at 1:00 a.m. had a meeting with Rapacki at the Foreign Office.

M: This was before you came home then?

G: Yes, that night. I was told to come home at my convenience, and my convenience was to leave at nine o'clock the next morning. So I think probably unprecedented I called the Foreign Office at midnight, called Michalowski and said, "I'd like to see the Foreign Minister."

So at one o'clock we met in the Foreign Ministry, and I conveyed this message which I thought was hopeful, that they were bending back in Washington, that they were offering not to bomb around Hanoi if Hanoi or the liberation front would stop doing certain things around Saigon. Rapacki allowed as how this was probably a move forward and

wished that we had come up with this when he was urging it early in the month, didn't know if this was too late to come up with something like this now. But at any rate, he knew that Hanoi would never accept the quid pro quo arrangement, primarily he said because they can't control the [National] Liberation Front that closely; they can't call off the shelling of Saigon, they don't have that authority, and so on. I told him I was going home and I would convey any message he had. I felt it was important that I have this late night meeting with him because I was going home the next morning, and I said I would convey to Washington his response, his attitude, personally.

So I went home the next day. I got to the airport about six-thirty. I was picked up by a State Department car, and immediately met in Dean Rusk's office with Dean Rusk and McNamara and Katzenbach, and one or two others, a very hush-hush meeting. It was agreed that we would quit the bombing unilaterally, this little group, and that we needed some formulation--

M: Around Hanoi, you mean?

G: Around Hanoi. So I wrote myself a telegram that--I stayed up that night until one o'clock with Mr. [Leonard] Unger who was now ambassador over in Thailand or Laos or somewhere. But anyway--

M: He was William Bundy's assistant then, wasn't he?

G: Yes. At any rate I wrote a telegram to myself on the theory always that the person who has got it down on paper. . . .

We were having a big meeting at ten o'clock the next morning with the Vietnam task force, with Walt Rostow and Gene Rostow and Harriman and Rusk and what have you, the ten or twelve that were involved.

At any rate I had another meeting that next morning with Rusk and McNamara, and except for maybe one or two editorial changes they accepted my telegram. McNamara left by a back door. Then Rusk and I and Bundy I guess--Bill Bundy--went in and met with the group. And there was quite an argument, Walt Rostow being very strongly of the opinion that we were giving too much if we stopped the bombing around Hanoi without asking them to give up something, his grounds being that if you do this then as we go down the line in peace negotiations they will expect unilateral concessions from us then; that we ought to make it clear right now that we aren't giving them unilateral concessions.

And he went on to point out we should learn a lesson from the Korean peace talks; I don't remember the analogy, but that they were dragged out for another six months or so because some concession was made. At which point Rusk took him to task, saying that, "I was there and this is not true. As a matter of fact, the reason the thing dragged on another six months is because of our mistake." And that kind of shut up Walt Rostow at that point. And we carried the day.

This telegram--I had a reservation to go back to Warsaw that evening--

M: The President was out of town as I recall.

G: I didn't see the President.

M: No conversations by phone or anything with the Ranch?

G: Not me. But conversations were had by Rusk, Bundy, or Ball, or somebody--whoever--Katzenbach then. It was cleared at any rate by the President by one o'clock that afternoon, and this called for a unilateral cessation of bombing within ten miles around Hanoi. And at the suggestion of McNamara it wasn't something that we *would* do, but something that we *had* done. Because at two o'clock the next afternoon, it will have been put into effect. It was put into effect--or *that* afternoon.

Anyway I flew back that evening to Warsaw, left that evening and got to Warsaw at six o'clock Christmas Eve. I had wired ahead and asked my deputy to arrange a meeting with Rapacki at seven, so I went right from the airport to the office. I had been awake for quite a few hours.

M: Really Christmas vacation time.

G: We had planned to go to Garmisch; my family were in Garmisch skiing, and I was supposed to be there for two weeks. I never got to Garmisch.

But at any rate I went to the office and changed my shirt. Then Walt Jenkins and myself--Walt being my deputy, DCM--went to see Rapacki at seven. I said to Rapacki that I went to Washington, conveyed the sentiment that he had expressed to me, and I was gratified to be able, after being gone for about thirty-six hours without any sleep, to come back and tell him that which he had felt was necessary had been accomplished, that as of two o'clock this afternoon the bombing within ten miles of Hanoi had ceased, and will cease indefinitely in the hopes that this will get our talks back on the track.

We had a fairly long discussion, and while typically Rapacki said that "this may be too late to do any good," there was no question that Rapacki was quite overjoyed and felt

that I--and thanked me profusely for the efforts I had gone through to get this accomplished. And I left that meeting feeling very good. I felt very strongly that Rapacki clearly had what he wanted. I mean, I had gotten to know Rapacki pretty well, and Michalowski also, and I was sure that both of them felt that this was what was necessary to get talks started in Warsaw.

And then the wait began. About the twenty-seventh I hadn't heard from the Foreign Office, and I wired Washington and said, "I'm getting edgy. I'm thinking of giving Michalowski a call and asking him what's up." And they advised against it, and I took their advice, saying in effect that these things take some time. The communications between Warsaw and Hanoi are probably pretty slow, just hold your horses a bit.

Rapacki the day after Christmas had called and asked did I mean ten nautical miles or ten statute miles, so I figured they were down to cases with Hanoi, and told him it was nautical miles.

But at any rate on the twenty-ninth at 6:00 p.m. I was called over. Rapacki kind of threw up his hands and said, "I'm sorry to say we're going to have to bow out of these discussions." He went on at some length to say that--put the onus on us, of course--if we had taken this position when he had asked us to take it back on the third of December, he was confident that it would have been the answer. But as far as he was concerned, maybe everything we had done up to now would some day bear fruit but at this point in time he didn't see any point in continuing the discussions and we should end them.

Well, we talked back and forth. And of course, as you can understand, I was horribly crestfallen and tried desperately to get some thing going again. I don't remember

what I did or said, but in effect said, "Look, we can't go this far and come to the end of the road. I know that you felt the other day"--on the twenty-fourth--"that we had responded to you and let's not give up now. We're too much involved in this now. Let's not give up, either of us." But no response.

I went over a few days later and saw Michalowski, and I made some suggestion to him on my own, as I did often, but I always reported it. And this time I reported it and got slapped down pretty hard, I guess. I had suggested that--the President had said that any little thing--and I said to Michalowski, "Let's get this thing started again. I just came over to review this thing and to see if we can't get something started again. It's a damned shame that--why don't you try again?" I don't remember just how I said it, but I said, "Why don't you test us on what the President meant on 'some response--any response--from Hanoi will be recognized by us,' and let's get some response. It doesn't have to be anything great, but let's get something and get this thing back on the track." And I reported this conversation, it was a long conversation and a very interesting one. But I got a reply back rather soon saying that I should discontinue these kinds of conversations.

Now the reason probably is because the conversations had shifted to Moscow, and I believe there were some going on a little later in Algeria and so on, and I think they didn't want to get things crossed. Also I left the thing with Michalowski that he'd talk to Rapacki and get back in touch with me, and he never did. So it didn't cause any bother.

I felt then, I've given an awful lot of thought--at the time I gave an awful lot of thought to this--because after all I had felt when I came back from Washington that I had in my pocket the means to get this thing going again. I had felt tremendously exhilarated by

the response I got in Washington, and the ease with which it was [done]. I didn't have to sell anybody. By that time I think people were sold on it. But at any rate I gave an awful lot of thought and wrote out my interpretation of what happened to the department. Subsequently, I think probably in February of 1967, I was back home, I appeared before Fulbright's committee and over a couple of hours gave them my genuine interpretation of what went on.

My interpretation can be stated very simply. One, that the Poles were trying to get something started again; that they certainly weren't on our side, but what they were trying to do I felt was to find the best possible bargain they could get out of us, as an agent of Hanoi; that Hanoi had always been very careful not to give them any authority to negotiate for Hanoi or to discuss this for Hanoi, but simply had given them what I call a hunting license to find out what kind of a deal they could get out of us, and having found that out, to present that to Hanoi, and Hanoi then would make a judgment on whether they'd bite.

I think on the twenty-fourth of December Rapacki felt he had shot the game he was looking for; that he had gotten out of us what he felt was the best possible thing he could get out of us, and he felt it was enough to convince Hanoi. He then spent the next five days trying to convince Hanoi. Hanoi just wouldn't bite. And in effect, we weren't put on by the Poles during this period of time; the Poles actually thought they were contributing. And they obviously had Russia's imprimatur on this. But they were probably as frustrated as we were in not getting anything out of Hanoi. And the fact that Rapacki never said that "Hanoi's position is this," was probably a reflection of the fact that he didn't know what Hanoi's position was. And in fact that whether the bombing had happened or not was not a

matter of great relevance in terms of the realities of the situation, only the propaganda of the situation; that we made an egregious error in bombing simply because of the public opinion effect of this, both at home and abroad, that we lost a terrible battle of public opinion, and we lost very badly. But that public opinion was misinformed; that public opinion's judgment--the judgment underlying our public opinion loss, our PR loss as it were, was that had we not bombed, something would have happened, and I think this is false. I thought it then and I think it now.

I think it most interesting that December 5 of 1968, Mr. [Wilfred G.] Burchett, the pro-Hanoi Australian newsman, in an interview with Mr. [Robert H.] Estabrook of the ***Washington Post*** in New York said in effect the same thing I said to the Foreign Relations Committee back in February or March 1967. [He said] that the Poles never really had any assurance from Hanoi that Hanoi would meet with us given a certain set of conditions. I think that history will bear this out, that if the records are ever shown and if things like Burchett's observations become more numerous as time goes on, that the fact that we made an error in the bombing--which I think we did--and I had this justified to me by a member of the State Department some time later on grounds that the bombing had for a long time been in the works, and that to call it off would have probably alerted Ky who would have blown his stack. And that actually President Johnson and everybody else were just as hopeful that the weather would remain bad enough to preclude a resumption of bombing during this critical period, but it just happened. The only reason that sounds rational to me is that I can't justify it on any grounds, but I couldn't explain it on any other grounds more sensibly than that. I think we made an error in bombing, an error that has long lasting

effects because if anything undercut the credibility of our government and our President, that episode did. And in so doing, it made very difficult the pursuing of what I think is a rational course of foreign policy around the world, and therefore had very long-lasting effects. I think the cost that was suggested, if that were the case, should have either been borne or we should have bent every effort to prevent if from happening, put Ky under lock and key if necessary. It seemed to me that we could have called off that bombing very unobtrusively, and I don't think anybody will accept the argument, the explanation, that I've just repeated that I got. Certainly I never accepted it, and I think it was a bad error. I don't know what he was referring to because I didn't feel like asking. But when I left the State [Department], I went around last June to say goodbye to several people I had worked with. I said goodbye to Bill Bundy and without any further embellishment of this conversation, Bill said, "You know, John, you were right in December of 1966." And I didn't ask him why--in what context he was speaking.

M: The great publicity in the United States has come from [David] Kraslow and Stuart Loory's book [***The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam***].

G: No. It happened long before--the publicity came long before the [book]. Loory was over there, came over, this was some time after, though. The damage had been done, PR-wise. On January 19, [1967] Estabrook reported some of this out of Montreal. The Poles had gone throughout Europe and talked to other foreign ministries.

M: This is how it gets out? The Poles in this case--

G: I blame the Poles for the--the Poles went on the offensive after this whole thing collapsed, probably to re-establish their credibility with Hanoi, and just did us dirt in every capital of

Europe. I know I'd be seeing the Belgian ambassador or the Dutch ambassador, and they're saying, "Well, this is the report I got from the conversation with Rapacki and would like to know what you think of it." And I'd rebut it then.

But long before Kraslow and Loory--I know Stu Loory very, very well--got their book out, the damage had been done. Now Stu came over to Poland before he wrote this book, before he wrote the articles in the ***Los Angeles Times*** which preceded it, and gave the interpretation to me. He had a fantastic amount of knowledge; he didn't get anything out of me, really. I think probably in the course of conversation I verified a couple of things for him, but he had the whole story. Fantastic.

M: It was really a very careful reporting job, investigative reporting.

G: Well, he had all kinds of inside help. I don't know where he got it. He'll never tell me, either. But my God, I know, and highly secret, there was a résumé prepared in the State Department, a chronological résumé of these events, and if Loory didn't get a copy of that I'll eat my hat, because he had me seeing Rapacki at 7:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve; he had me leaving on a certain plane; he had me--I mean, I just couldn't quit. The only thing I could differ with him on--I mean I sat there with my jaw dropped open, he had such detail.

M: That probably helped confirm--

G: Yes. Now, he had some errors in it, and I didn't correct them, simply because I had committed myself to the Poles, and it was a personal commitment as well as a commitment to my government not to discuss this, and I keep my commitments. The only time I discussed it with other ambassadors was to refute the Poles when they broke their commitment to me. But I did discuss with Loory at some length his conclusions, and he

concludes, of course, he and Kraslow conclude that our bombing exploded the opportunity. I went into great length to try to convince him that despite the fact that our bombing was stupid, it doesn't explode an opportunity because no opportunity was there in the first place. Hanoi was not ready. And I think if we were in a more rational time people would realize that governments do not let some thing like a bombing stand in the way of a major change in policy, if they're ready to make that major change in policy. All this stuff about--people who have never been in the East, such as myself, who are suggesting this great Eastern psychology and this great Eastern attitude--the fact of the matter is that nothing in the record, nothing in the atmospherics, nothing in the side remarks I got so often from Michalowski and others, leads me to think that the Poles had any confidence at any time that they were speaking for Hanoi. And I am as convinced as I'm sitting here now that the Poles had only one thing out of Hanoi, this hunting license. Hanoi did not obstruct their efforts to find some way to get a package from us which they could sell to Hanoi.

M: That was the last time that Warsaw was used in this way, then, while you were there?

G: No, the next round, of course, was when we got to the point of trying to arrange for the Paris Peace Talks after the cessation of bombing on March 31. And Warsaw was one of the sites. There were two sites that Hanoi wanted; one was Warsaw.

M: The first was Cambodia.

G: Anyway, Cambodia and Warsaw were the two. At any rate, we were very much involved in this for a while there. We were called over by the Poles who made a strong pitch for Warsaw as the site. This happened two or three times. We took the position that Warsaw wasn't a good site, as you know, but at this point hadn't ruled it out, but had left them with

the clear impression that if we got down to the point where the cheese was binding, we would rule it out but we didn't want to rule it out.

At any rate I got a formal request then for the U.S. to use Warsaw as a site. I had to turn this down. Then I got another call from the Foreign Ministry that they had been instructed by Hanoi to propose that I meet the next day--this was April, sometime in April--secretly with the Ambassador from Hanoi. This was on a Wednesday, I think. The reason I remember that is because something happened on Saturday. At any rate I was elated, because at that point we didn't know whether talks were going to get started, and this was what we had fought so hard for to happen. A secret meeting does not fit any of the troublesome questions that had been raised by Rusk and others concerning a public meeting with press and all of that, and I saw no reason in the world why we shouldn't have this secret meeting and find out what was on their mind. So I sent a "flash" back, which you don't do very often, because it preempts everything, and waited for about--I don't know whether it was the next day or late that day, but anyway I waited interminably to get an answer. I think I had to wait until the next day, which was a great surprise to me because I thought this was a real breakthrough, until I got a prosaic wire back the next day saying that, "We've already turned this down last Saturday." And it was about the time that I almost blew my stack. Here I am in Warsaw and this had come up in some other countries, I forget what country--I guess in Laos, I think probably in Laos.

M: This tape is running off the end here.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

JOHN GRONOUSKI

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, Mary Gronouski, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with my late husband, John Gronouski, on February 5, February 10, and February 14, 1969 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recordings shall be available to researchers.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.

(4) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

/s/ John Gronouski
Donor

11-30-99
Date

Archivist of the United States

12-16-99
Date

Deceased 1/7/96