INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 1, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: DAVID HALBERSTAM

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Halberstam's residence, New York City

Tape 1 of 2

G: You said that you had a Lyndon Johnson story.

H: Yes. I was, in 1960, working for the ***Nashville Tennessean*** in Nashville, Tennessee, which had a Texas connection because the owner had been a man named Silliman Evans, and his son was in fact named Amon Carter Evans, and they were connected to the Texas people. Therefore it had been a paper that had a particular friendship to Lyndon, and Lyndon was then running for the vice presidency. When he came through in 1960 I got on the plane--let's see, it was an old Electra--and we were campaigning all over the South. At a certain point late in the evening, he said, "Where is the boy from Silliman Evans' newspaper?" and there was a lot of scurrying around. George Reedy was there, and they scurried back and brought me up, and there was Lyndon. I think he was in his pajamas by then and put his enormous arm around me. I don't think I was as big as I am now, which is six feet two and 195 pounds, but he seemed enormous. He turned to everybody and he said, "This boy is the finest reporter in all of Tennessee." So we start with that. (Laughter) And I believed him, I believed him.

G: Of course you did.

H: There was that wonderful thing. And that was a marvelous memory, actually. It was a great day. We traveled--they were using him on the

religious issue. If you worked in the South in the fifties as I did, you had somewhat more tolerance of Lyndon and the particular view of liberalism that he represented, because you watched how difficult it was for any southern politician to try and pierce through the barrier of generations of hatred on race and try and be at once regional and national. It's a whole lot easier to be regional and national out of New England or the Midwest than it was out of the South, because of race. In Tennessee we had [Albert] Gore and [Estes] Kefauver, and there was Lyndon in a way in the same boat.

That was a particularly moving campaign because if you'll recall in 1960, it wasn't just the race issue in places like Tennessee, it was the religious issue. There really is a belt in America that starts in sort of southern Indiana, and is like a cone expanding, like an ever-widening cone into Oklahoma and the Southwest. There's a deep and abiding fundamentalism. John Kennedy's religion was something of a covert issue then. I mean it was a burning brush fire among [what] I guess you would call the religious groups, in sociological and economic belief a notch or so below the Methodists. It was a great secret issue, and it really was burning like a brush fire.

Lyndon's job was to go back and forth through the South, which was then still largely a one-party area, and try and hold it for Kennedy. He was very good at it. Campaigns aren't any fun anymore; it's all television and credit cards and pollsters and whatever. There's not much human sweat anymore. But those days there still was. It was fun to cover campaigns and politicians still sweated and they were still earthy.

There was Lyndon going through and telling these stories, trying to keep the South in the Democratic column. He would talk about when Joe Kennedy took off on that plane on that secret mission, no one asked him his religion. And there was some Texas boy that apparently Lyndon claimed to know who was on a comparable mission. Probably dubious, probably no such person at all, but Lyndon professed to have known this other boy, to have visited him. And no one had ever asked this other boy's religion. No one had ever asked Joe Kennedy, Jr. his religion when he took off on this special mission. Lyndon went on, and it was a great performance, and he was loving it. Then he would talk about [Fidel] Castro and he would say, "First, I'd wash him, and then I'd shave him, and then I'd spank him," and everybody was whooping and hollering. It was a terrific performance, and he was relatively effective, I think. Tennessee finally, over the religious issue, did go for Nixon, but I think most of the Deep South held.

G: I think that's accurate, especially Texas.

H: Oh, that's right, because Texas was a big swing state in those days. Anyway, I just thought I would begin with that. Warm memories.

G: That's marvelous.

H: He also later said that I was a traitor to my country, by the way. Bob Sherrod was going out to Vietnam, I think it was about 1966 or so, and as a lot of people did he went and got briefed in the White House. Lyndon always wanted to know who was going out. There is a true story about Harry Reasoner, who would be anchoring the news on the weekend for CBS, and as he was closing he had said, "By the way, I won't be here for two weeks because I'm going to Vietnam." Even as he'd be coming out of

the studio, the red light flashed and it was Lyndon Johnson wanting him to come down and see him before he went. Lyndon was trying to put the last screw into everybody, turn the rachet one more time.

So Sherrod was in a situation like that. He was a very good World War II correspondent, I think for the ***Saturday Evening Post***. He went to see Lyndon and Lyndon turned to him [and] said, "Now, don't be like those boys Halberstam and [Neil] Sheehan. They're traitors to their country." When I heard about it later, I thought well, Lyndon, that's the kind of game you want to play, so be it. (Laughter) It's funny. It never hurt, you know, it was never really a wound. You would think that hearing the President of the United States say that you were a traitor to your country would be a little bit painful. But it was a game; that was Lyndon. Also there was never any doubt in my own mind and I think my colleagues, people--you'll see Ward Just, but Neil Sheehan and others--that we were very good patriots and we were good Americans, that our sources were good Americans, that our sources were the people who were fighting the war.

G: That's an interesting point, and it gets us into the middle of this, which is as good a place as any to start. Someone has remarked that what affected you most was the fact that you identified so much with the advisers, the people in the field.

H: Yes, I think that's where it began. When I went out there I was just twenty-eight years old. I had been in the Congo for I think about fifteen months, and I knew that Vietnam was going to be a marvelous story. You didn't have to be very bright to know that. I was young and single and I had covered all the stuff in the civil rights movement in

the South for all those years, and it was going to be a big story, and I covered the Congo and I had found that I could cover combat and not be too scared. I think you're always scared, of course, but you find you can do it for a variety of reasons: a belief in the story, ambition, all those things put together. I wanted a try at Vietnam. It sounded important; it sounded like a place where all these forces were going to be in conflict, and I thought, why not me? So I started writing the ***New York Times*** foreign editor to be able to go. In fact I remember by chance I was in Nairobi on a trip back from fighting in Katanga, and I got a cable saying, "Okay your request to go to Vietnam," finally. I was replacing Homer Bigart, who was a great hero, a very distinguished correspondent.

I got out there, and I had no particular bias--well, I did have a bias; I had a bias in favor of what we were doing. It seemed to me, being a child of that era, watching what had happened in Europe, the flow of refugees East to West, that that which we stood for was better than that which the other side, the communists, stood for. I thought, there's America out there trying to help this country; I think it's an important thing and I want to cover it. I suppose part of it was a belief, a hope that it worked. It was not, I think, very different from my other colleagues; we were all relatively young.

I think the first thing I did was to try and figure out how to cover it. Here was this huge country with a hundred different little wars going on. I had to find some way of calibrating it. First off, I knew I had to get out of Saigon. Anybody who's ever been a reporter knows you cannot take other people's versions of events, second hand or

third hand, and particularly people at the higher level of the bureaucracy. Bureaucracies have their truths and as truth filters up in a bureaucracy, it becomes more the bureaucracy's truth than the truth of the operating level. I wouldn't have been able to formulate that concept in 1962 quite as accurately, although it's a rule that has never failed to work anywhere since. But I had a sense of that.

So clearly you had to go out in the field; you had to see what was going on. And it seemed to me that you could not go helter-skelter all over the country, because then you were always going to be the new boy in the school. You were going to be some kid coming in that said, "Halberstam, ***New York Times***" on your shirt and they would receive you, but they wouldn't really open their hearts to you or share their confidences with you. They might eventually, but you were always going to be starting on the outside looking in.

So what I decided to do was to travel a great deal in general, but to reserve a couple of specific areas where I would go back and go back repeatedly. I would systematically visit, revisit, revisit, so that finally the people would come to know me; they would, I hoped, trust me, and I would begin to be able to calibrate it. So I looked around and I picked out a few areas where most of the fighting was going on, and I gradually picked out two areas in particular: the Seventh Division area and the Twenty-first Division area. It was clear that most of the fighting was going on in these two areas.

I got down there and the advisors were my age. And I was right, if you went down there the first day and tried to interview them they would give you the company line, you know, "Yes, we're doing wonder-

fully." If you kept your mouth shut and just went out in the field with them a couple of times and shared the danger, they would begin to trust you and to take you seriously, and from then on they would tell you what they felt. If you kept going out, they would begin to visit you in Saigon, spend time with you there. Sometimes they'd even call you up and say, "Come on down. We think we've got something for you." You had enormous identity with them and their problems.

They were enormously attractive, the best of a generation of the professional army, educated, with a high sense of idealism and purpose. They were not by any means jingoistic warriors. Rather they were really quite, I thought, elegant men. I was touched by them. They became our first-rate sources, and the pessimism and the doubts that fed into that press corps came first and foremost not from dissident Vietnamese politicians, as people later claimed, or this political group or that group in Saigon, or dissident State Department people. What happened was our sources became the people who were in the field, and who, finding that their pessimism was not being paid attention to by their superiors, turned increasingly to the press corps. And that was me and Neil Sheehan and Peter Arnett, people like us. As it got worse and as less attention was paid, a) they would tell us things more candidly, and b) men of higher rank would confide in us, not just captains, but colonels too; it began to go up the matrix. As the field became angrier with headquarters in Saigon, more bitter, they would turn more to us.

G: How would you differentiate this between the case in which the field soldiers were always disenchanted with the brass?

H: I think it's very different. I think first off what a good reporter does first and foremost is, he's able to read motivation. I think any reporter who's any good can read motivation as to why somebody is bitching. Is he bitching because he's a professional bitcher? Is he bitching because he's always unhappy? Is he bitching but he's really kind of happy in spite of it? Or is he someone who is deeply anguished because that which he is sent out to do is not being done? You always judge the nature of the people talking. We are not talking about your chronic combat bitcher, who is a kind of Joe-and-Willy guy with a lot of beard on his face who doesn't like some fresh-faced louie back at headquarters. These were combat officers, captains, West Point officers themselves. That's the first thing, so they're not chronic malcontents and it's not the kind of the bitching of the field per se. And what they were talking about was the most serious kind of stuff; it wasn't "Oh, that fucking high headquarters in Saigon never gets us hot pizza," or "Christ, I haven't had a hot shower in two weeks." They were talking about the fact that the people they were advising would not listen to their advice, that they were deliberately telegraphing their attacks so that the other side could get away, that they were not acting upon intelligence as to where the VC units were, that they were refusing to take casualties because the palace in Saigon did not want casualties.

In other words, that which they were saying was of the deepest kind of import; it wasn't chronic bitching. It was terribly serious and it would inevitably have a kind of political root. What made it particularly powerful was the high level of idealism and the sense of purpose on the part of the captains. These were not bitchers and moaners and

pissers and complainers. Quite the contrary, their idealism was just astonishing. So when you got that you got an enormous frustration and therefore it was relatively easy to calibrate them as very legitimate sources.

(Interruption)

I thought that the officers I knew then--and many remain friends now. I saw General Robert York about a week ago down in Alabama. Colonel Fred Ladd stays in touch and his daughter, in fact, is--

G: Where is he?

H: He's outside of Washington working for a company now, I forget which one. He's in the Virginia area.

G: Maybe Arlington or something like that.

H: Yes. His daughter is the caretaker of our place up in Nantucket and I stay in touch with him. John Vann, of course, is dead now. But these were really the most elegant and passionate--a lot of the officers, like Jim Torrance and Ken Good are dead, but some are still alive.

G: What about Colonel Daniel Porter?

H: Dan Porter, yes. He's somewhere down in Oklahoma I think. What's-his-name had talked to him.

G: Sheehan?

H: No, Bob York had just talked to him. He's somewhere in Texas or Oklahoma, I think. Dan Porter reminded me just of a wonderful high school teacher or superintendent of schools.

G: They say he looked very professorial.

H: He just seemed that elegant a man. He reminded me of what Omar Bradley must have been like, just had that sense of quiet toughness and dignity.

But these were men of such high principle and intelligence and character, and again I use the word, purpose. What was remarkable about that first wave of advisers was, I really think, the elegance of them. I remember coming back to a dinner party in New York a couple of years later. The beginning of the antiwar thing had gone on and I was sort of trying to talk about them as I thought they were, almost kin in many ways to the people in the Peace Corps, and being sort of shouted down at a dinner party. But I did have that sense of high purpose, not in a warrior-killer sense, but in almost a sense of duty, honor, country, which had something spiritual in it. There were really very few pissers and moaners there. I've never known a man with a more passionate sense of purpose than John Vann. John Vann, whatever his complaints, they would not be your kind of nickel-dime complaints.

Finally I think that a reporter is about as good as his ear, in his ability to calibrate sources. You know, there's a thing in hunting called Kentucky windage. You have a rifle, and there's a difference between the rifle and what is true, and you have to figure it out. So when you're interviewing somebody you're not only figuring out what is he saying, but you're thinking, why is he saying it and what is his motivation? Does he have an ax to grind, is he just angry because he's been passed over, or is he really angry about Vietnam? Is he angry because he's left wing or right wing? You're calibrating. Your ear gets to be awfully good at that. You're almost immediately subtracting or adding points based upon the degree to which you think the motivation is in effect clean or pure. None of us is clean and none of us is pure.

G: Did Homer Bigart leave you any legacy?

H: Yes. Yes, I think he did. I think, first off, that he was so great a reporter, and that I was honored to be his replacement. That was a very considerable honor within itself. Not that I was going to be tied to what he said or thought. He never said, "Hey, kid, it won't work," or anything like that. He never did that. But the knowledge that he was going to read my stories every day, that this man who is a great reporter and who had won the Pulitzer Prize twice and who had this enormous toughness of mind, that I was succeeding him and that he would be reading my stories was an enormous additional obligation.

The American Ambassador, [Frederick] Nolting, once said that he thought that--it's astonishing how innocent senior public officials could be then about the press--that there was a ***New York Times*** editorial policy on Vietnam, and therefore reporters were sent out there to keep it alive. He had no sense of who we were. There was no ***Times*** policy, obviously. There's a certain kind of reporter, and certain reporters will respond to certain stimuli, I suppose, in parallel ways. But I didn't feel that I had to pick up a burden of prejudice because of Homer. I felt that I had the right to make my own decisions. But the sense that this man was there over my shoulder, it seemed to me, was an enormous incentive to carry a torch.

He was very good. He wrote me a letter, and he outlined who the varying people [were], where to eat, which guys might be pretty good sources. [About] the Ambassador, he said, "He's not terribly bright, not terribly bright but better than most." He thought Neil Sheehan was going to be a wonderful young reporter. He said, "He's young, raw, he'll be good." Mal Browne, I think he thought he was a little more

private. He gave me a couple of CIA sources and things like that. He just said. "Use your common sense. Keep your head down," whatever.

G: Can you reveal the CIA sources?

H: I think he thought Gil Layton [?] would be pretty good. I don't think Layton was ever a very good source for me, but I think he was a source for some of my colleagues. I think Homer had known him from some previous place. It's very hard to pass on sources; it is so personal a thing. It's a shared texture, a source and a reporter.

For instance, Vann had not been a good source at all for Homer. Homer had known Frank Clay fairly well and Frank was relatively optimistic--Lucius Clay's son; he was John Vann's predecessor--and I think Frank was relatively upbeat. John came in and John was relatively upbeat for a little while, and then it began to come down on him and he began to see the darkness. I think most relationships between a reporter and a public official at a given time are not ones that can be lightly passed on. I think it's something of a shared moment; you are moved by the same event at the same time. John Vann and I in a thousand years if we met in America might not have liked each other. We were not anything alike, politically, socially. I think he probably didn't believe in very much that I believed in and vice versa. But at that moment, coming to that same set of evidence, both of us, passionate and thinking this was important, responded in much the same way and we became locked to each other.

It's very funny. Two or three months after he left Vietnam I wrote a long piece about the decline in the Delta. This was long after he had gone, and not a word of his is in the story. It was so similar

to a briefing he was then giving in Washington, trying to get people's attention about how badly it was going, that they thought of court-martialing him for a time because they thought he had leaked to me and been the source of that story. That's what I mean about shared evidence and shared moment. And our passion was very similar at that moment. I think if we lived in another time and another place John and I wouldn't have agreed on anything; political candidates, where to go to eat, women's rights or anything. I don't think there would have been a single thing. We might have been able to go fishing together. There probably would have been something like that that we could have shared, but not much.

G: I think you called him a redneck once.

H: John was. John really was a redneck and kind of joyously so. He never pretended to be anything that he wasn't. Yes, I think he was and I think sort of proudly so. I remember one time I really--I was enormously admiring of him because he was so brave, such an astonishing leader of his own men, he so held them and their spirits. I had this really admiring view of him. Then one time we were having drinks, he said, "Come in, I want to show you something," and he showed me a photograph that he'd had--I guess it was a photograph of his family. He'd had some Vietnamese street artist color it. I thought it was just the hokiest, most awful goddamned thing I could ever see. Here's this man who I greatly admired and who I trusted, and suddenly it was like seeing an absolutely different dimension of him. I just wanted to say, "John, John, don't do it! Let it be the way it was!" They used to do that, they'd get these guys and they'd do these terribly romantic--it

would always end up being far more romantic than the family and it was like being painted and airbrushed; it was just awful. I wanted to say, "John, John, don't do it!" So every once in a while you'd have a glimmer of the differences between you.

G: That's interesting, especially since I understand Ho Chi Minh made his living doing that kind of thing.

H: I wouldn't be surprised.

G: Tell me about John Mecklin.

H: You really should probably talk more to people who knew him in the old days of ***Time***. I think John probably even then was contentious. I think there are certain people who probably shouldn't be press officers; I'm one of them. A lot of people who are good reporters would not make good press officers. Someone like Frank Mankiewicz, who's never really been a reporter, was a wonderful press officer. You have to have somebody--a lot of times former reporters do not make good PIOs, or public affairs officers, because they know the press tricks and they can't let go of their former selves. It's hard for them to separate themselves from their past and their knowledge of the game. The best press officers I've known are generally people who in an odd way love the idea of government and like the press. Joe Laitin is a very good one.

G: Did you know Barry Zorthian at all?

H: And Zorro, yes. Zorro's smart, good. He doesn't bring the baggage of having been a reporter. I think Zorro was very good; I like him.

(Interruption)

John was contentious and difficult and smart, a former reporter. You'd have to get someone who knew him in Time-Life in the old days. I think

he was filled, again, with the phrase I used, the high purpose; he wanted to be there, he was a volunteer, he was touched by the Kennedy inaugural speech. There he was, and he was the Saigon official most caught by the collapse of the policy, because he was the spokesman for an embassy that was increasingly out of touch, and he was in charge of dealing with a bunch of young reporters who weren't automatically going to accept the embassy's word. Everybody else accepts the policy which begins in Washington, and goes to Saigon, "We are winning the war. [Ngo Dinh] Diem is the best we have. We have a strategic hamlet program. It will win. General [Paul] Harkins tells me things are going well in the field." Washington tells this to Saigon, and Saigon tells it to everyone else, and tells everybody to get on the team. Then up comes the pessimistic stuff filtering from the field and the reporters glom onto that. There's only one group in all Saigon that isn't going to buy the line, and that's the reporters. And they glom on here.

So the official who gets caught in the buzz saw is Mecklin. There he is. He's not an easy guy to deal with anyway. I think he tried. Occasionally we would get on with him. He was very nice to Neil and me at one point when there were supposed to be attempts on our lives and we stayed in his house for a few days. That was very generous of him. He was really caught himself, I think, between the ambivalence of what he'd signed on for, to make this thing work, and all the signals he was getting that it wasn't working. He didn't have the sources we had, but he had to know that we had pretty good sources. And yet we were younger and he didn't really know us. I guess John must have been twenty years older. It was very odd. The relationship began acrimoniously and as

the policy began to unravel he became increasingly sympathetic to reporters and increasingly alienated from Nolting and from others, like a number of people, like [William] Truehart as well.

So I think it was a probably very unhappy tour for him. I think he was not well. He had throat cancer at one point. I remember it got so acrimonious that Mert Perry, who was a man I really loved--Mert was the sweetest of our group, I mean the kindest--Mert said, "I hope the son of a bitch dies." [It] snapped my head back, he was that angry. Later it got a little bit patched up, but there was really bad feeling. I have a feeling--I don't think Mecklin's personal life was very good then. I don't know whether he was in effect separated from his family. I think it was a bad time for him; I think he was not very happy. I think that role that he'd started, which he'd signed up for out of idealism, was turning out as Vietnam turned out for a lot of public officials. You start with high idealism and you end up with a great sense of ongoing darkness and trying to save your own reputation. I think Mecklin was one of the first people caught in that. How do you stay loyal to the people you're serving when you think they're getting the thing dead wrong, and at the same time keep your own integrity? There's a lot of problems in that.

G: How do you think he would have characterized the press corps in Saigon?

H: How did he?

G: How would he? It's hard to tell from his book.

H: Yes. He at one point got in a fight with Nolting. Nolting wanted him to make a report saying the American mission is being undermined by sensationalized reporting by a bunch of young, inexperienced, astigmatic

reporters. I think I remember virtually the exact phrase. Someone naturally leaked the exact phrase to us within twenty-four hours; that was the kind of sources we had. When you're on a bad policy, people just leak like hell. So that made it acrimonious.

Like I say, the book is ambivalent. He and I got on pretty well at the end. There was a battle at the end where a Vietnamese officer had given me a beautiful knife that he had captured, and I thought, "John has taken a lot of shit," and I gave it to him as a present, I mean, only as a symbol of the fact that I thought that we had by and large sort of patched up acrimony. If you asked me what he finally thought, I think he would look back on that whole dark chapter and have thought, "Well, the reporters were by and large right, but they were an unpleasant, righteous, contentious, difficult bunch, and piss on them! But they were mostly right." I think that's what he would probably say.

G: I think the closest he comes in his book is to criticize the reporters for lack of humor.

H: I guess so. It was not a relationship that brought out a lot of laughter. What was true was if you were a visitor to Saigon and you'd spent a night having dinner with the top people in the embassy, or a night with the top people in the CIA, and then a night with us, you might well have had your best evening and shared more laughter with us than with the others. On the other hand, if you'd flown over to Saigon as some people did, and you said, "I'd like to meet you guys because I believe your reporting has been sensationalized, left-wing, and you're probably unAmerican," it would have been a disastrous evening. I think the

question is, when you punch someone in the nose, are you then going to be able to have a very good uproarious time drinking afterwards?

There was, I thought, genuine camaraderie in those days among each other. We were young. There was a lot of laughter. We had wonderful-looking Vietnamese girl friends. Francois Sully had been there for, I think, fifteen years and Francois knew all the upper-class North Vietnamese girls who had gotten divorced. An upper-class Vietnamese girl really couldn't go out with a westerner, but once she was divorced she could. So there we were, young, with these nice-looking lady friends, and we were on a great story and there was a lot of laughter, camaraderie of battle. I mean, when Ivan Slavich, the commander of the first armed helicopter company would come up from the field, or John Vann, I mean, the evening was filled with zest and humor and [the] raucousness that combat produces.

On the other hand, I think the evenings with high public officials were often very unpleasant and tense and angry. I think it was very much in the eye of the beholder. It was deadly serious stuff. We were often accused of deliberately trying to hurt the American cause. We were accused of being left-wing. We were being accused of not going into battle, which was a particularly bitter accusation. Goddamn, but it used to rankle with me. I was going out time after time with *ARVN* soldiers! If we got hit, the First Cav wasn't going to come and bail our ass out; we were going to have to stay there on the ground. So having that particular thing used against us was a very bitter thing. We were accused of being cowards. That was really ugly stuff.

If someone says, "Look, I think it's tough down there, but I think I disagree with you. I think in the long run we're okay. I understand why you're writing that, but I think if you don't take this and this and this and this," that's another thing. But to have people make those assaults upon you--in one instance General Victor Krulak told other Washington officials and Washington reporters that Maggie Higgins had told him that I had seen a bunch of VC bodies and [had] burst into tears. And there was some stuff in the Hearst papers that I was trying to uncover an Asian Fidel Castro. It was really nasty. And meanwhile you're going out and getting your ass shot at all the time. So that will tend to diminish some of the humor, or it will mean that you share the humor only with those who have shared other things with you.

There is one point I would like to add here. The conflict between the reporters and the high officials did not begin with the reporters. We did not arrive with a built-in contempt for the high-level Americans we were to deal with. We never went around demeaning their patriotism and intelligence. When we finally defended ourselves, it was rather late in the game, and only reluctantly and largely in self defense. At the start we took them at face value. For example, I had a very easy and cherished working relationship with Ed Gullion, who was the ambassador to the Congo. We swapped information and got on quite well, and I think he knew that I knew certain things about the country because I could get around readily and informally, as he could not. I remember when I did the same thing with Fritz Nolting in Saigon that I used to do regularly with Gullion--which was to tell him some of the unofficial stuff I was picking up in contrast to the official line--he literally

threw me out of his office. The occasion was the defection of a VC colonel, and a friend in I Corps, Bryce Denno, the senior adviser there, who had been in on the debriefing, had already told me of what had happened in the private interrogation, how contemptuous the colonel was of the ARVN. When I mentioned this to Nolting he became apoplectic and started screaming at me to get out of his office. I was quite willing to go.

So Vietnam was different from any other place I had worked because the policy was built on quicksand, and it was all dishonest from the start. As the policy was a fraud, so were most of the daily developments. From the moment I arrived (which was the weekend Francois Sully was expelled in 1962) the reporters were the enemy--so judged by the regime, and by the American embassy, and by the *senior* American military *as opposed to the military in the field*. The attacks were immediate and relentless. If we did not agree with the embassy and MACV line, then there was an assault upon our patriotism and our manhood. I mentioned that Johnson had called Neil and me traitors to our country, which gives you some sense of the tone, and that Kennedy pressured the publisher of the ***Times*** to pull me out.

In retrospect, we were young, hard working, and oddly enough almost innocent. Not innocent about what was happening in Vietnam; we got that down very quickly, that the war wasn't even being fought, let alone won, but innocent about what would happen to us when we reported the truth. We did not think that reporting the truth would make us the enemy of our own government. I suppose we thought that someone back there in Washington at a higher level would take the two essential

versions of what was happening, the optimistic MACV line and the pessimistic journalistic line, and try to adjudicate them. (Someone actually did, John Kennedy--for all his irritation with me--very much believed our reporting and not the official version.) I didn't think anyone would garland me or invite me to dinner at the White House for going against the essential line, but I didn't think it would make me the target of my own government, or that the more accurate we were, the more we would become the target of a very high powered, quite organized assault upon reporters, in which the United States Government systematically savaged the truth. I suppose that's real innocence. What happened, of course, was that the more accurate we were, the more the attacks raged--our patriotism, our manhood, our loyalty.

We didn't begin by having personal feelings about the people in the embassy, but a year and a half of this stuff, and it was quite relentless and quite personal on the part of the U.S. government and its fellow travelers in journalism, and everyone got edgier and more tense. If you sat down to dinner and someone made some stupid comment about the press, there was likely to be a very quick rejoinder.

I think it is true that by the end of my tour I really came to hate Harkins. I think I controlled it in my copy, because it would have been unprofessional not to, but I had been raised to believe in the honor of the American military, and here was an American general who was not only refusing to act on the reporting of the brave men under his command, who were risking their lives every day, but who was punishing them for their personal integrity. (In retrospect I wonder now if an intelligent and gritty general had held Harkins' post, and had reported

to Kennedy that not only were we not winning, but that he did not think there was any way we could win--how that might have influenced the eventual decision making in Washington.) But I felt then by the end of my tour that Harkins should have been court-martialed, and I still think that today. A lot of American officers and grunts fought very bravely in a bad war in Vietnam, but one of the things the American army at its highest level lost in Vietnam was its integrity. The wrong people were promoted for the wrong reasons, while people who told the truth were shunted aside, their careers damaged. And that began with Paul Harkins.

G: Did you ever get the feeling that someone was putting pressure on the editors in New York over your stuff?

H: I think they were very good about that. I later heard about Kennedy asking the publisher of the ***Times*** to reassign me and all that, and they would I think from time to time get annoyed with me, but I think that was in the normal run of an aggressive reporter and a particularly contentious one, which I am. I've always, when I've worked for papers, pushed whatever story I had to the outer limits. I did that in the Congo; I did it later in Poland. I did it in Vietnam; I did it in the South. I just think you take it and run with it. I don't think the problems were that much different from most of the contentiousness I had elsewhere. We had problems when I was in the Congo, where we didn't have these great issues. They'd cut a story of mine, and I'd yell at them, and then they'd yell back. I was always a sort of Peck's bad boy. I think they did pretty well in insulating me from what were obviously mounting pressures on them. I didn't really find out about the thing of

Kennedy and Punch Sulzberger until much later. They didn't say, "My God, we've got to do this and this and this. The President doesn't like your work, so for God sakes, be careful."

I could, from time to time, sense a nervousness when Maggie Higgins was out there. She came out from the [***New York Herald***] ***Tribune*** and did a series of bizarre stories. She was only there a week and every day she'd be out in the field. Obviously these were Pentagon puff pieces, how they were winning the war in the Delta. The ***Times*** began to send me cables saying, "Higgins today says such-and-such, winning the war in the Delta." I was getting annoyed and I said, "Careful, hey, listen. She's only been here a week, and she's a Pentagon mouthpiece and everybody knows that. I've been covering and tracking very systematically the decline in the Delta for sixteen or seventeen months. Don't worry. We're okay. We've really got it right. Just forget what she's saying." And when they didn't, then we scurried a little bit on that. I think that was a symbol of their nervousness. But I think they were by and large pretty good.

I think it's hard on a newspaper when, particularly in a more reverential era, you take on the flag. We weren't just taking on the President, we were taking on the flag. It was a country coming out of the McCarthy era; we were not as much out of it as we thought, otherwise we wouldn't even have had the commitment. The reporters in Vietnam were not just taking on the President, we were taking on the flag. You had to go back a long time in American history to find a precedent where a bunch of reporters are saying, "We're not winning a war, we're losing it," and seemingly going against the flag and against what the generals

[said]. You didn't have it in Korea. You didn't have that, you had much easier relations. You didn't have it in World War II. You didn't have it in World War I. I can't vouch for the Spanish-American War or the Philippine insurrection; I don't know what the reporting was then. But it had been a long time, if there was any precedent at all. We were walking on a lot of very thin ice.

G: You did have it in the Civil War, I think.

H: I don't know what it was like in the Civil War.

G: At one point Sherman banned all reporters from his command, because there were lots of stories that he didn't approve of.

Let's talk for a bit about 1963 and the fall of Diem.

H: Sure.

G: I remember that I and a lot of people back in the country were wondering, what in the world do the Buddhists want? Did you have any feel for what they wanted?

H: I always thought it was a political rebellion. I always thought it was the only outlet for any non-Diem interest in the country. Everything else in the country was controlled. The army was controlled; it was Diem's. It was therefore Catholic and by and large from the North. The press was controlled, Catholic, and from the North; the bureaucracy, the legislature, whatever. It seemed to me that the only other outlet for dissidents was the Viet Cong. So this was the only outlet for political dissidence in the country, for some kind of--some of it was obviously probably connected to the Viet Cong. But probably most of it was a desire for some kind of pluralism and some kind of rejection of a

Catholic-dominated society. It was an attempt, I think, to reject a Catholic northern authority, autocracy.

G: Did you ever talk to any of the hierarchy in the Buddhist movement, Thich Tri Quang or any of those people?

H: Yes. They were very articulate. Tri Quang was always a kind of mystic. Trying to talk to him was like going to a Harold Pinter play. I don't know if you remember when the Dallas Cowboys had Duane Thomas; you remember the Duane Thomas interviews after a game, which also sounded like they were scripted by Harold Pinter. But Tri Quang was always doing a kind of mystical move on you. The others really, some of the others, were much more overt in what they were doing. There was no one leadership, there were different factions, this group, that group, and there were egos. I would assume that what they wanted by and large was a political rebellion against Diem. It was an age-old Vietnamese resentment of a Catholic Vietnam, which was in their terms an extension of colonial Vietnam, a sense that when the French had arrived, they had, through their church, given the best education and the best jobs to those Vietnamese who had converted. I suppose it was therefore part of the neocolonial struggle, a sense that the colonialists had given all the good things to their quislings. But it was political, and it was getting larger and larger.

The interesting thing was the inability of Diem to deal with it. Nolting would go over and see him every day and ask him to do such and such, and Diem would kind of nod his head, and he would never do it. I think I wrote in those days that it was sort of like watching the government commit suicide, just day after day. I remember there was

this very smart Buddhist spokesman named Thich Duc Ngiep. He said, "We will throw them the banana peels for them to slip on." And they did, they just played right into it. All the things that those of us who had been critical of the regime had predicted happened.

I think the important thing is that the regime was not a malevolent dictatorship; on the Richter scale of dictatorships in the underdeveloped world, Diem was rather mild, albeit incompetent. I think his was one of the last feudal regimes, and I always thought that Vietnam was a war between a feudal society with modern weapons (our side) fighting a modern society with, in effect, feudal weapons or captured weapons (their side). Given the challenge, Diem could not deal with it, and challenged, he did not know how to respond. I think the Nolting view was that Diem was popular and respected and could deal with challenge. The press corps view, based upon what was happening in the Delta, was that [when] challenged, he was arthritic and feudal and could not deal with it. I think our feeling about the Buddhist thing was that as it happened, he could not deal with it, therefore it confirmed all the doubts. That became I think gradually the Truehart-CIA position, and in the end I think only pretty much Nolting believed he had some capacity to deal with it.

G: What about John Richardson?

H: I think Richardson stayed with [Ngo Dinh] Nhu to the end. I think there was a great deal of division within the CIA. The sort of old [Edward] Lansdale people like Rufus Phillips were very dissident by then, because they were also reflecting the--

(Interruption)

H: There was a split I think between what I would call the Lansdale people, [Charles] Bohannan, Rufus Phillips, the people who had installed Diem in the first place, who I think had more contact in the field and who thought--for instance, Rufus Phillips, who was in charge of the strategic hamlet program, said, "It's a washout, it doesn't exist." You'd go and see Nolting and he would say, "Oh, yes, but we have the strategic hamlet program and it's working very well." And you'd go see Rufus and he says, "We don't have any program. It's been overrun. It doesn't exist. It's all fraud."

G: Did you know Lou Conein in those days?

H: Yes. Yes.

G: What was he doing exactly?

H: I think he's a surviving soldier of fortune. I like Lou. God only knows what he was really doing. He's an adventurer. He's like a guy in one of these pulp paperback novels with a guy in uniform on the top with a grenade in his teeth plowing through the underbrush. He had roots in that society going back a long time, I believe until really the end of World War II. I think he was among the early people who came in. I think he had a lot of connections within the Vietnamese military. I think he was shrewd. He was really an adventurer and he was certainly a partial source in those days. I don't think he was a particularly major source, but I think he was one of the sources and I think he was increasingly alienated from Diem. I don't know whether you'd call Conein part of the Lansdale group, I don't think he really was. But he certainly was part of the CIA group, which was increasingly alienated. Because he, for one thing, knew what was going on in the country. A lot

of the generals were his friends and they were telling him "It's hopeless. It's hopeless. We're losing."

G: Was he [called] Three Finger Brown?

H: Yes, that's right. That's true.

(Interruption)

I don't know. He's a sort of a very smart, semi-soldier of fortune. I guess he was with the agency. He'd been around. He knew a hell of a lot. I tell you one thing he knew, he knew the goddamned war was being lost and wasn't being fought. That was one of the things that I knew he knew because we used to talk about it. But he was in very close contact, I believe--I could be wrong on this, but one of the smartest men out there, one of the really great secret sources, was a guy named Francis Serong, who was the Australian intelligence man there, who had been in Malaya and who was an old-time jungle fighter and who really knew a lot about the war. Serong and Conein were quite good friends, I think, and Serong, who was very careful with reporters, would only see me a couple of times and under guarded conditions. But when he talked, it was just brilliant. He really understood the war, and he was extremely knowledgeable. I remember [in] one of the last interviews, I was talking about Harkins and I said, "Goddamn it, doesn't Harkins finally understand what's happened?" the fact that all this stuff that they had been announcing was bullshit, that the VC had overrun it, that they had won the war by the fall of 1963. And he said, "Harkins is like a petrified rabbit who's looked down and seen the snake that's about to strike him."

(Interruption)

G: --and the Nhu family and the regime, assuming that they would be brought down, who were seen as the replacements? That was always an objection from the embassy, saying, "Yes, we know they're bad, but who else have we got?"

H: I suppose the people like Rufus Phillips saw Big [Duong Van] Minh as much as anybody a replacement. I think the question is--going back to Homer Bigart's phrase, "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem"--I think Homer said, "What happens if he slips in the bathtub?" Can you base a policy upon one man? Commitments, it seemed to me, have to be societal. If you make it only on an individual, then there's not enough there because you live in an age where there's assassination, airplane crashes. There's got to be a linkage of societies, and if there isn't, then it's a symbol that the policy itself is vulnerable if only one man can speak your language. Which is true, Diem did speak our language. The question arises, does he speak the language of his own people? I don't think [it was] on anybody's mind terribly much was who will replace him, although when you would ask the CIA people they would talk about Big Minh, and they began to remember deeds of derring-do that Minh had done. It's true that probably Minh had some mild popularity.

What's true is, and I think Neil and I came to this conclusion more and more in late 1963, that Diem was not the cause, he was just a reflection of the problem; that in the phrase that Bernard Fall later used, we were fighting in the footsteps of the French, although dreaming different dreams. That we were prisoners of the French-Indochina War, that the people who were our generals were in fact former French corporals. That Diem, who was our leader, was attractive to us because he

was allegedly a nationalist, but by the terms of the Vietnamese people, this is the people in South Vietnam, he wasn't very much of a nationalist because he had sat on the sidelines during the whole Indochina War, which was their war for independence.

We were trying to find a nationalism that was anticommunist. What is really true, and it's at the core of the entire American political dilemma there, and it's not something you can really readily get into your daily news stories, even for those who started in 1965, the invisible paragraph in all news stories should have said the Americans are trying to create a noncommunist nationalism. Unfortunately, all the nationalism went over to the Viet Minh starting in 1946, and probably 1949 was the last time when there was any viable alternative of offering up a noncommunist nationalism. We were really prisoners of history by 1948 or 1949. By then they had taken over the nationalism and there was no such thing as a viable, noncommunist [state]. You could get very attractive people and they might have eleven followers. But getting people to go out in the countryside and fight for you was another thing. There were always people looking for the third force, and there was no third force. It was all over.

I remember there was a CIA guy named Dave Hudson [?]--I think he later killed himself--[I] once sat down with him [and] that really brought it home to me. He was talking about some province in the Delta and how bad it was going. He said, "Look what you have on one side. On the government side you have somebody who's province chief, probably Catholic, probably from the North, upper class, who is corrupt, takes all the American money, wants to keep as much as he can, and wants not

to close the gap between himself and the peasant, but to widen it even further. Now the Americans," he says, "come in with their egalitarian ideas about closing the gap. But he wants to widen it. The whole point of being a province chief is to have the gap. And against him is a VC officer who's been living there all his life, who's been fighting revolutionary war for twenty years, always on the winning side." That was the invisible match-up that we never really saw. And it was the match-up--have they told you about this thing out in California [a conference on Vietnam] in early February?

G: At USC?

H: Yes.

G: Yes.

H: There's going to be a lot of people there in case there are people you want to track down. That's a chance to take your machine and really get a lot of people.

There is the thesis now expressed by people who would like to have won the war, [who] like to have blamed the press, [who would] like to have turned Tet into a victory. Part of that thesis is that Tet was a victory, albeit misreported, and that the press and particularly television misreported that, and misreported what happened. I would take the direct opposite: That, if anything, television in fact consistently underestimated the strength of the other side. The way I would try and explain that to you is, it seems to me that particularly in the years from 1965 on, we had *absolute* military superiority. There was not a given day that if we were going to contest them that we could not win. But they had *absolute* political superiority. That is to say, they were

always regenerative and they were able to keep coming. Therefore, if you figure that and bring television cameras to it, then in effect we're going to look better on TV than we should because you cover the *military* superiority, *Americans winning, VC running away and hiding in the bush. But you can never cover, and we never did cover, the political superiority. Therefore in fact television, if anything, made the VC look weaker than they were. It's a reverse view of what is often a conventional view, which is that television helped lose us the war. I'm absolutely convinced of its rightness.*

G: The people that hold to that thesis, if I read them right, would at this point interject that the VC, despite the great psychological victory they scored, which nobody quibbles with on either side of the argument, were so gutted by the casualties that they took that they reduced their capital, as it were, beyond the point of no return and weren't a serious force after that. How would you respond to that?

H: I would think that they could keep coming, that they did keep coming, that we were fighting the essential birthrate of the nation, that they might have damaged the Viet Cong infrastructure, but the capacity to resupply from the North was as strong as ever, that the American will would have been always questionable, that they could fight forever and keep coming forever. In the immortal words of the Prime Minister--

G: Pham Van Dong?

H: --Pham Van Dong to Harrison Salisbury, "How long do you Americans want to fight, Mr. Salisbury? One year, two years, three years, five years, ten years, twenty years? We will be glad to accommodate you." I think, yes, the VC might have been weaker, but the NVA would have been as

strong as ever. I think the key factor, and I don't think anybody in the American command and I don't think Westy [William Westmoreland] ever understood it, was *they controlled the rate of the war.* I mean, I think Westy just never understood the war. If there was a big battle and a hundred VC were killed and twenty Americans died, Westy would think it was a victory. He wouldn't know that they had allowed that battle to happen, that they virtually lit flares saying, "Come on in and get us." By that I mean that anytime--say an American battalion goes out fifty times looking for VC, real action. Maybe it finds them once or twice in fifty times. So we don't control the rate of the war. They can find us anytime they want to. If they want to really nail us, they can set the bout. So they therefore can control the rate of the war. They can drive it up if they want. Say there were three hundred thousand young men coming into the battle age every year, which I think is a rough estimate. It might be four hundred thousand.

G: Four hundred thousand, somewhere in there.

H: It's about [that]. Let's say the estimates were really right, that we were killing a hundred thousand a year. All they had to do is send that many more down and set the tax rate; they were taxing us in a real sense. It was true that--I think we were losing roughly ten thousand men a year and they were losing roughly a hundred thousand, and that was a tax which was acceptable to them and not acceptable to us. So they did control the rate of the war, and they could have kept on. They might have had to do it with NVA instead of VC, but they could have kept doing it.

G: If we can go back to 1963.

H: Sure.

G: Things got pretty hot for reporters. As I understand, there were assaults on reporters.

H: Yes.

G: Was this Diem's secret police at work?

H: I think so. I think it was the secret police, and it was an ugly time. You have to expect that. The stakes were big. We were the only thing in the society that they couldn't control. It was a government heading toward suicide. It was increasingly alienated and ever more isolated. It was losing support in its own country. The reports of coups--I mean, it wasn't us who sensed coups--that they were picking up all the time; it was a society in a kind of paroxysm of death. I think it knew the end was there, and as that happened, it was lashing out, and it lashed out from time to time against us. I don't think a reporter should complain about it. I don't like reading about reporters who complain about the dangers of their job; it goes with the territory. You go there, you go out and do your job and you don't piss and moan about it.

It was dangerous. When I think back of that time, I don't think of the danger. There was one point right at the very end when Neil and I were really marked and for a while there were genuine threats that our residences were going to be hit. We finally did stay in John Mecklin's house for about four or five days because it was really considered [advisable]. Not only our sources but the embassy sources said, "They're really going to kill you." I think at that point we moved over. There was really serious reason to believe that we would be killed at night in our homes. But generally, when I remember fear, I

remember fear of being in battle, being in helicopters and being on the ground. That was really much more dangerous. That was the real danger, going out [in combat]. We were still going out with the ARVN, and they're going up against big, tough--the VC battalions, by September, by August, were big and audacious and cocky and not afraid of anything. They were almost into regimental strength.

G: You say you were more afraid of being killed at home than you might have been afraid of being assassinated on the streets, something of that sort?

H: There were these rumors that we were going to get knocked off or blown up in the house, for some reason. We had a particularly good source, now dead, named Dang Duc Khoi who--I don't think Khoi was playing games with us. I think he really was genuinely scared for us.

G: Can you spell that last name?

H: Dang, D-A-N-G D-U-C K-H-O-I. He was a very sophisticated, bright man, died a couple of years ago. It was very sad. In my years in America, he was my closest Vietnamese friend, and he just died almost I think of a broken heart. He was a former Ministry of Information official, [a] very sophisticated, elegant man. Khoi really thought that they were going to kill me and Neil, the two of us particularly. And there were some serious warnings. There were also some warnings that they were going to put us in a cab and the cab's tires were going to be fitted with *plastique* and we would be blown up. So that when we would go to a cab stand, we would never take the first cab. We wouldn't take cabs off a cab stand generally, we would try and hail them on the street.

But that part doesn't weigh heavily in my memory, I must tell you. I don't go around thinking, "God, it was dangerous, and boy, we were heroic." It was there and it was a part of the thing. The story was so overwhelming by then.

G: You'll excuse me for observing that you would make a conspicuous target.

H: Yes, I was really one of the taller people there, yes. You knew that you could get it, and there were a couple of times--there was once or twice some Buddhist demonstration where the secret police went after some reporters. It was a little bit messy, but that's all just part of the game.

G: How did the other reporters in the community respond to these attacks?

H: Peter Arnett is really tough, he's not afraid of anything. Horst I think was always a little bit worried, because he's a photographer.

G: This is Horst Faas?

H: Faas, yes. Neil is not afraid of anything. I mean, we were young, we weren't smart enough or experienced enough to really worry. I don't think anybody was much scared by that, I just think. . . . I suppose if someone had been killed, then it might have changed, but for the moment--I suppose there was probably a covert feeling that these people are so dependent upon American aid that they just aren't lightly going to kill an American reporter. I don't think that was ever voiced, but I suspect we halfway believed that.

G: In the summer of 1963 the news was broken that Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge was going to be [appointed]. What were your thoughts on hearing that?

H: I didn't know what he would be. I suppose a sort of wariness; we'd been beaten up enough by the American embassy by then to be kind of wary. Later, if I looked at it now, it would look to me as John Kennedy's attempt to begin probably a cover-up and pull-out by having a classic Republican establishment figure as an ambassador there. What better thing than to go through the 1964 election by saying, "Well, our (Republican) Ambassador says"--that neutralizes the campaign. Then probably--this is all ex post facto--in January, 1965, he says, "Well, it really can't be won without combat troops," and therefore the spokesman for it is a Republican and Lodge. He would have been a perfect figure. After all, he stood up to Khrushchev at the U.N. So I was wary of him. Just to go back, that's my retrospective thinking. I was wary of him.

He got there, and he was immediately, as I think we've written, quite generous both to Sheehan and me. He came off the plane, almost made as I recall a beeline to us, wanted to talk, invited us both to lunch, which had never been done before, was enormously courteous, looked at us and finally said, "You know, you guys seem to have it right. Everything you say seems to jibe with what I've heard. Back in Washington, they're putting out all these stories about you. It's not it at all. You're doing your job. And in fact, they're putting out that you're left wing and whatever, what your motivation is."

So that relationship ended up being relatively pleasant. He was not going to fight us. He, I think, probably arrived convinced that you could not deal with Diem. And in addition, his wife is an exceptional woman. She's smart, and gracious, and generous. She always gave me the

impression she'd voted for Kennedy in 1960 and not Nixon; I always had that feeling that she had not voted for Nixon. I remember being with her at the time when Kennedy was shot, I think it was about Thanksgiving, and God, she really was mourning. I had the feeling that she might well have voted against her own husband in 1960.

So I mean [for] that part [there] was not the contentiousness that had preceded it. He had come, I think, with his mind--I won't say made up, but I would say more or less made up. He had done a lot of homework; he'd listened to a lot of people, and I think he thought that Diem couldn't do it and he probably would not be very flexible. And the fact that Diem had cracked down on the Buddhists even while Lodge was flying over there, I think he regarded as an act of betrayal and an act of bad faith.

G: Was Lodge his own press officer, as so many people have said? How was John Mecklin's status affected by Lodge's arrival?

H: I think that Lodge preferred to deal directly. I think that Mecklin welcomed him and thought he would have--my memory, this is really, God, now you are talking nineteen years, and things like this, some things are terribly clear and some things are not clear. My sense is that Mecklin had a good personal relationship with Nolting, liked him personally even as he disagreed with him. I think as the whole thing unravelled you had Nolting going this way and Truehart and Mecklin and others just saying, "Can't go any more. Sorry, Fritz, but...."

I think John had a kind of generous personal feeling for Nolting, that he was a man carrying out orders, and a decent man in a bad situation, and that John sort of welcomed Lodge and then was very, I think if I'm not

mistaken, embittered because Lodge essentially cut him out, cut out much of the embassy, wanted only his own guys, a guy named Mike Dunn and I forget who the other guy was, Platt or Pratt or something [Frederick Flott]. I forget his name. He came over with two people. Mike was a real wheeler-dealer. And either Lodge was going to deal with the press himself, or Mike Dunn or the other guy was. Mike later worked for [Spiro] Agnew for a time. I don't know where he is now, but I'm sure he's in Washington. I'm sure he's wheeling and dealing; I'm sure he's on to something good. I think Mecklin was very bitter about Lodge, and I think it was mostly personal that he got cut out. And there was obviously tension between Harkins and Lodge as well.

G: Yes. A lot of stories circulate about what CIA was doing. CIA has become a loaded term since the investigations and all of the revelations and so forth. What was CIA doing in Vietnam at this time?

H: The CIA wears so many hats. The problem with it, I think for someone like myself who believes in the need for good intelligence organization--you know, is a guy in intelligence in analysis, or is he in operations? Can you split the two? And if you are not able to split the two, can you really be in intelligence at all, can you be in analysis? It is one thing to have an organization which analyzes what's going on in the countryside and in the war. It's another thing to have that organization in charge of the most important operation there, the strategic hamlet program, and therefore an operational thing, because no one is going to say, by and large, "My own operation isn't working," until very late, as Rufus did.

So you have different people wearing different hats. You had John Richardson, who was assigned to Nhu, who was in effect Nhu's counter-

part, and that was going to be the strategic hamlet [program]. When you sit back in retrospect and you think that Ngo Dinh Nhu is in charge of this particular organization which is going to be a national revival, and is going to bring all these people into this new way [of life]--I mean the idea of it is so bizarre, this deep, screwy, opium-smoking, misanthropic, sinister man; he really was sinister. Diem was a sort of mild, befuddled last mandarin, but Nhu was really a screwy remnant of the past. The idea that he's in charge of something like the hamlets, you really know right off you're in trouble.

The agents, I mean some of the agency people--later there was all this anti-agency feeling. "Down with the CIA" became the sort of demonology, demonic thing of the left. When you're in the field and you're a reporter, your friends often tend to be agency people because they're doing the same thing you are. They're analyzing and evaluating and they're smart. They're not terribly ideological. They're sitting there trying to figure out what's happening and why and what's going to happen next. So a lot of your good friends tended to be agency people. You liked them and respected them, and they shared your curiosity and your analytical ability.

Then you had guys who were operational, and that's a different thing. Because then they're not being analytical. I think one of the smartest men I ever met on Vietnam was a man named George Allen, who I think was an analyst on that country for twenty years, mostly not listened to, but I think never got it wrong. He'd be very good to talk to on this. The key thing [is], are you in analysis or are you in operations? The moment you have both, you can't do both. Because, what

do you mean, the strategic hamlet program is not working? What do you mean, we're losing the war? Listen, we have the strategic hamlet program ourselves, and it's working. No one is going to report negatively on his own program.

So there were far too many spooks running around there. The Israelis are good because they have a very small intelligence mission. We, the reporters, were good because we were small. There were about four or five of us and we vouched for our information ourselves. If we went down in the field, the Delta, and I came back and I had dinner with Mert and Neil Sheehan that night, I would say, "Jesus Christ. Not only is John Vann more pessimistic now and more bitter, but Jim Torrance, who always believed it was worth doing, doesn't think it's worth doing." It was firsthand, validated reporting. I was calibrating people firsthand. Vietnam gave me the sense that the smaller the intelligence unit, the better, and that the American intelligence units are much too big. There were thousands of spooks running around near the end, none of them knowing what they were really doing, I think. There were just too many people.

G: You've answered the next question, so I'm going to proceed. You mentioned Nhu's opium smoking. There were a lot of stories.

H: We always assumed he was. He was a very strange man. If he wasn't, he should have been. He was a man apart; he was a very odd man who seemed to inhabit his own planet. We always assumed that he was. The Vietnamese were absolutely convinced that he was a serious opium addict, I mean smart Vietnamese whom I trusted. I can't calibrate it, I never wrote

it, but it was one of the things that you subliminally factored in. Kentucky windage on that one.

G: Are you satisfied that the story of the coup itself has been sufficiently told?

H: Yes. I think that we thought that they were no longer an effective instrument of American policy, [and] that we created the climate in which they would fall. We had, in fact, protected them from their own officers in the past. We were a participant in that government from day one. The idea that we were only a participant the day they fell is a mistaken one. We had used our full might and majesty to fend off other forces many times. In fact, there were some other earlier incidents in which a man named George Carver, who later became very high in the CIA, was thrown out of the country, I think going back to 1960. He was then a young agricultural attaché and he became persona non grata. I think they thought he was tied to a paratrooper coup against Diem.

G: That was November of 1960.

H: Of the young people that we had trained in their military, a high percentage of them were very antagonistic to the regime. So therefore we were involved in that government from day one, and propped it and propped it and propped it and used our full leverage to tell other people that no, we would not tolerate them. In effect, we pulled away the umbrella in the beginning of October--I forget the dates, but probably in October. There are varying differences in messages coming over the Voice of America or whatever. You will probably be more au courant. But we certainly made clear that they were no longer the only source of legitimacy in that society, and as such we created an atmo-

sphere in which they could fall. Since we were the only thing they had left anymore, that meant they were going to fall.

I think that Lodge wanted them out of the country; I don't think he wanted them murdered. I think that Diem and Nhu thought they could beat history one more time. They had negotiated their way back from one previous successful coup, and therefore they played out their hand a little further than they intended to. In addition, I think Lodge thought he could control the generals, and he couldn't because of the 1960 experience where in fact they [Diem and Nhu] had swung it around at the last minute. This time the generals made sure they were killed. I was always told it was a general named Mai Huu Xuan who was the guy in charge of the murders; M-A-I H-U-U X-U-A-N, Mai Huu Xuan, who was a real tough butcher-like general. But other people would probably know more about it by then. But I think the essential story of the coup put together is pretty accurate. I don't think that anybody wanted them killed. I think Lodge really did hope he could get them out of the country alive and I think he tried that, and I think their arrogance did them in, because they had beaten a coup once before.

G: Did you have any sources close to the new regime, to the Minh regime?

H: I knew Big Minh some. He had been up in I Corps and I had had an old friend--not an old friend, someone I met there who I liked very much--a colonel up there named Bryce Denno, and we used to spend some time up in--

G: What was that last name, sir?

H: Bryce Denno, D-E-N-N-O, who was an American army officer. Again, the same breed of very fine officer. He'd been in the Big Red One in World

War II, and I think he's down in Washington now, retired. But a really fine officer. He'd been Minh's advisor up in I Corps. Minh was obviously a very decent man, and I had a little knowledge of him and some of the other people, but I didn't feel particularly wired in. I didn't have much belief in him. I was by then really mostly preoccupied with what was going on in the countryside, which I thought was a horror. I had a very good source named--what's again--Christ, I'm tired--the same name as the prime minister of North Vietnam?

G: Pham Van Dong.

H: Pham Van Dong. There was a very good general in the South named Pham Van Dong, and Pham Van Dong was a very good source for a number of us. He was a tough old soldier, not very ideological, a real soldier. I went out with him. He was put in the Seventh Division area and immediately began to move things. I remember one day we went out and he went to some district capital, and he said to me, "Ah, this guy here, the district chief, is one of my officers so he will tell me the truth." And he said, "How many villages in this district are there?" and they guy said, "Twenty-four." And he said, "And how many do you control?" and the guy smiled and said, "Ten." He said, "And how many did you report to Mr. Diem and Mr. Nhu that you controlled?" The man looked rather sheepish and said, "Twenty-four." I mean, it was virtually over by then, and that was the sense, that it was really ominous, that the VC had virtually won.

Pham Van Dong would be very good. I believe he may still be in America in the Washington area. He was a particularly tough, outspoken officer, and a smart one.

G: I plan to interview some of the people in the Vietnamese community in Washington before it's over.

Was there an editorial climate at the ***New York Times***, either then or as time went on, as regards Vietnam? I've got a paraphrase of C. L. Sulzberger, in which in 1962 he said we ought to use air power to pulverize the bases and the lines of communications of the guerrillas in North Vietnam. That's almost a direct quote. How did that evolve over time?

H: I don't think there was a ***New York Times*** line. I think in terms of the editorial policy the best person to see would be Johnny Ochs, who lives in New York City and probably would love to talk to you, and probably feels very proud of the fact that the ***Times*** was dovish, and can tell you some probably wonderful stories about Lyndon Johnson calling him and whatever. Probably Scotty Reston could tell you about how angry Lyndon became with the paper and how he would protest in those days. It's part of his increasing anger and then I think later paranoia about the press corps in general, and the ***New York Times***. He considered the ***Washington Post*** a good paper and the ***Times*** a bad paper.

But in terms of the reporters--well, I think you have the editorial policy. And you have the reporters; they all started out the same way. The people who replaced me weren't going to make my mistakes, they weren't going to be prisoners of my views just like I wasn't going to be a prisoner of whatever Homer had written. But events tell themselves; the story is there, you cannot evade it. You are more passionate there, because friends of yours are dying and because it's a passionate story. You go out there and it seems life or death. You sit up all night

arguing. You work all day and at nine o'clock you went out to dinner with the people you had been working with all day, sources. You'd be arguing at one o'clock when it was time to go home. And you'd do the same thing the next day. The subject was always on your mind, so it made you very obsessed. Everybody was obsessed.

G: Did your views on our commitment or the importance of Vietnam to the security of the United States evolve?

H: Oh, sure. I think you start assuming it; you assume it without even questioning it. You open the little capsule in your brain and it was from GOV 180 taught by McGeorge Bundy and later Henry Kissinger at Harvard; the U.S. in World Affairs, plant the flag, stand anticommunist. We are part of this thing, SEATO, NATO, whatever. You assumed it without questioning it, and then gradually as you began [to be]--the phrase I use is "involuntarily tempered by battlefield defeat"--you begin [asking], why are we not winning? Maybe we're doing the wrong thing. If we're doing the wrong thing, should we be here? There was this evolution that takes place. First it begins with a feeling that it is Diem, because he is [the president]. Why aren't these things happening? Why won't they attack? They won't attack because Diem won't let them take casualties. So you begin by at first blaming Diem, and then you go on later and you think that Diem is just a symptom of what is a deeper malaise. Why do we have Diem? Because all the nationalism is on the other side; because they fought the French. And then you begin to trace it back, and you realize that whatever there is in a larger global perspective, in your own preference for an anticommunist world, that in that country at least, the role of the Indochina War just makes you a

prisoner of history, that the other side has taken on all the nationalism.

G: You wrote I think in 1965 in ***Making of a Quagmire*** that we were on the wrong side of history. In the same book, if I'm not mistaken, you said Vietnam was one of the five or six most important--

H: Yes, I think I was wrong on that. I think there was a part of me that said--I think the intuitive journalistic part was right, that it was the wrong side of history, and there was a part of me that was still climbing off the assumptions of policy. I was still getting off. And I think I was wrong on the latter, and I was, even then, climbing further off it. I remember arguing with people in late 1964 after that book was locked, when I began to sense they were going into combat commitment, just saying it can't be done. You can't bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail because it's an idea, not a superhighway, and if you send combat troops you're in the French experience. So I was even then winding down, but I think you're right about that ambivalence we were all caught in. Neil later wrote a piece entitled "No Longer Hawk, But Not Yet a Dove." We were all caught in that transitional [phase].

G: Where is Mr. Sheehan these days?

H: He's in Washington but he's doing a book on John Vann, which he's been working on.

G: I think I'll probably leave him alone until he's finished.

H: He'll be good for you. He's a wonderful man and he's very careful.

G: Have you seen the allegation that Sandy Karnow has made that Pham Ngoc Thao and Pham Xuan An were double agents?

H: I think there was always--I mean, there are two very different men here. Has Karnow written one piece about both of them or what?

G: It's an insert in ***Encounter*** magazine; it's about a year old now.

H: I haven't seen that.

G: It was in August of 1981. He says that Pham Ngoc Thao now has an honored place in the cemetery of Ho Chi Minh City.

H: I think anybody that knew Pham Ngoc Thao thought he was a live hand grenade, that he had a very odd curriculum vitae. Joe Alsop loved Pham Ngoc Thao. For a while he was known as the Alsop colonel, because he was Joe's favorite colonel. Thao was always, I thought, too tricky by half. He was always one of these guys who was dazzling in his presentation. If the embassy brought in a dubious visitor from America, no one could give a more dazzling presentation of why we should be doing it, whatever our faults were, than Pham Ngoc Thao. He was on many sides. He was never someone I particularly trusted or felt close to.

Pham Xuan An is a very different case. I gather that he has stayed behind and that he has risen in the other side, and it doesn't surprise me. I hope he's well. I think he's an admirable person. I think he was straight in his dealings with the American press corps. If he had a secret VC incarnation, it wouldn't surprise me. It wouldn't surprise me if anybody I had known there was. I think no one is who he seems to be, entirely, in a place like that, and I think you have to start with that assumption.

But since the question of An has come up, it should be stated that if he was an agent for them, all the better, because it gave them a very good listening post on the Americans. He knew American journalists; he

knew American political officers, and he was very smart, and thus he would have been a very good reporter to his superiors about what Americans were like, which is not a bad thing, I think, in a complicated world. As far as we were concerned--I have a feeling that An probably had bets covered in both directions, and that probably he thought that the side that he preferred would lose, which was the western side, in which case he would go the other way. There would be no doubt in my mind ever that he was a patriot, that he loved his country, that he was an honorable man. He was a very good source for a variety of western journalists, even--no matter what he finally had in his heart as the bottom line, he was certainly not a source that created negativism or pessimism. Whatever doubts we felt about our ability to win the war did not come from him; it wasn't as if An would take us out at night and say, "It can't be done. It can't be done. How can I convince you of that? We will not win." It wasn't that at all. I mean the negativism came from the American officers in the field. The pessimism came from there, that they felt it was not being won, was not even being fought.

An was good on the intricacies of Vietnamese politics. He knew some of the games that different people were playing, the factionalism. I once asked him what it would be liked if the VC won. He said, "Oh, it won't be very much fun. It will be very gray. I will have to get up in my gray underwear every day and do calisthenics." An loved his dog. He said, "I wonder if they will let me keep my dog if they win." But I think there's this idea now that is current because there are a number of people who have been very tricky about the whole thing, Arnaud de Borchgrave and people like that, who were sort of tourist journalists

who now have said that the press was led astray by these double agents. I don't think that anybody was much led astray by Thao, and An was just really a good colleague. If he was working the other side, it wouldn't much surprise me. I would wish him well. It certainly didn't affect my pessimism or that of anybody I can imagine. Oddly enough, I think he played it quite straight. If he was VC all the time, then he was astonishingly honorable all the way. So really, An is a very fine man and I wish him well.

G: Perhaps that's what they call living your cover.

H: Yes, maybe that is. There were many masters there and there were many definitions of being Vietnamese. If the thing had gone the other way and the other side had won, An might have tilted the other way. An was a great skeptic, as the kind of quote I gave you [shows], "I will have to wear my gray uniform and do exercises. I wonder if they will let me keep my dog." He was a great skeptic, skeptic of the war, skeptic of himself. It's funny, I feel great affection for him; I'd love to see him again.

G: If you were writing ***The Best and the Brightest*** today, what would you change?

H: Nothing.

G: Not a word?

H: I wrote it so I wouldn't have to change it. I don't know, I might be harder here or there. I can't see changing it. I tried to write the book as if it would be viewed a hundred years from now, so I don't really--I wish I had been tougher in ***Quagmire***, which caught the ambivalence of someone who thought it couldn't be done, but was still climbing

off the policies that he brought with him, and I wish I had been tougher in that book, and I wish I had done a better historical job. I think Neil and I always felt that when we came back that we failed to get the importance of the connection to the French past into our stories, how much we were prisoners of the French-Indochina War. I have regrets about that book, that it wasn't better and tougher--oddly enough, because it was much criticized for being too tough and too critical. I remember coming back in 1964 and having a long talk with Michael Forrestal, who was the White House man on Vietnam. Michael said, "Do you have any regrets?" implying, "Were you too tough?" And I said, "Michael, the only regrets were that I wasn't tougher." And I still feel that way.

But you can only go as far as your sources.

Tape 2 of 2

G: You were saying--

H: I think there's an important point there, because I've often wondered why we weren't better, Neil and I, and picked up on the French-Indochina War and the importance of that history a little earlier, the fact that the Americans were prisoners of the French experience, and that all the nationalism was on the other side. Why weren't we really a little bit better in that area? I've thought about it a lot, because we were, I think, very good in our military reporting. The military reporting stacks up, I think, wonderfully well. I'm terribly proud of it, and I'm less proud of the political reporting, because I wish it were a notch better. In fact in the ***Pentagon Papers***, the Pentagon's own analysts

concede how much more accurate people like Neil and I were than the reporting out of MACV. That's something to be proud of.

The reason was that all you had to do was be a good reporter, in the military thing. The sources were there. There was John Vann and he was obviously the smartest officer in the field, a great statistician, who could use statistics to prove that the war wasn't being won and in fact wasn't being fought. It was very easy to find good military sources, to keep tracing and tracing and find intelligent, valid, thoughtful men there.

What was true about the political side was--because you are only as good as your sources--that there were limits to our sources. The fact is that the devastation done by the McCarthy period and the housecleaning of a generation of the State Department people going back to the fall of China, and what happened to John Stewart Service, to John Paton Davies, to John Carter Vincent, the whole generation of the China hands and the people who would come behind them, meant that there were really no people in the State Department that were the right sources for us, the people who could look at Vietnam and say, "My God, it's an instant replay of China, the collapse of a feudal order." Looking back later, by 1966-67, as I read more and more, the parallels between China and Vietnam become more and more clear, and the fact that it was really the collapse of a feudal order, that the other side was the modern side and we were the feudal side. The feudal side, which was our side, didn't look feudal because it had modern weapons and helicopters and whatever, but it was feudal. The reason that we as journalists weren't as good as we should have been was that the State Department people who

should have been able to put it in the proper historical context had all been destroyed by the McCarthy period assault upon the State Department. As they were not good in the State Department, we in the press did not have the sources we should have, too. So we were that much weaker. If we had had better sources, we'd have been a damn sight better there, too.

G: The North has taken over the South and now administers it as one country. The North has knocked over a couple of the dominoes that were so fondly referred to, Laos and Cambodia. Was South Vietnam vital to U.S. interests?

H: No. No. It wasn't, and whether in fact Cambodia would have been knocked over had we not brought the war over there in the Nixon-Kissinger years, the famous assault upon the Parrot's Beak--I remember watching that with a melancholy feeling because it brought the Indochina War into a country that had so far managed to stay out of it. No, I don't think it was vital. I think we upped the stakes in it by going in. In fact it was an indigenous struggle; it was Vietnamese nationalism that was at stake, we could not stop it, we had nothing to offer them. Our policy was politically bankrupt almost from the time we went in, because we were only offering them a military solution which could not be imposed upon the political incompetence that preceded them. So it would have been nice, I suppose, to win in Vietnam, it could not be done. The price was not acceptable.

What we did, tragically, was create a Vietnam which made everything seem more important, rather than, had we been smarter, allowing them just in effect to take the country and claiming, hey, it's not

important. There are ways you can either escalate or de-escalate a crisis. Carter deliberately escalated the crisis in Iran and made it more important. He did it as a way of running against Teddy Kennedy. He said, "This is crucial; I will be a commander in chief," instead of just saying, "Oh, it's just a little thing of a bunch of crazies there. Let's cool it." In effect, we did the same thing with Vietnam. We made the inevitable defeat just far more important, and amplified it for the world. We made it our defeat instead of defeat of an old order, which was what it was. I don't think America as a society is an old and dying order. I think French colonialism in Indochina, which is what we built upon, was an old and dying order.

G: Let me ask you a question that's a little out of place perhaps, but I ask everybody.

H: Yes.

G: Do you remember what you were doing when Lyndon Johnson made that March 31 speech in 1968?

H: Yes, I was in Chicago doing a piece on Dick Daley. He [Johnson] flew out there I think the next day and in fact blamed it on the media. If you'll recall, there's a next speech at the American Society of Broadcasters, and he said, "What would you have done if you had been in Dunkirk with your cameras?" He was mightily pissed.

Yes, I remember. I took no pleasure from the Johnson stuff. I thought he was a politician the like of which we will not see again, and he got hit by a freight train, which is history, in the Vietnam War. I don't think it was anything he wanted to do. I think ***The Best and the Brightest*** is a book which is quite sympathetic to him really, and I

think that while some of the Johnson loyalists complained when it first came out, that even they, some of them, have come around and seen that it at least puts him in context and it was not a war that he sought, but that once impaled, he was not going to turn from it. But I remember no joy, no particular pleasure. I remember that as being just a long, dark passage in our lives in which none of us were as good as we should have been, and no joy in his departure or his pulling back. Probably a feeling that it was a good moment, that he had to get out, that he was impaled on that thing and therefore he had to get away, that he could not be himself and be the war president, that it had just gotten out of control.

I think he lost control of the country in 1968.

G: Many reporters and people working for television were very surprised that he had decided to take himself out of the race. There had been stories saying that this most political of men will never even seriously. . . . Were you surprised?

H: Yes, I think I was surprised. I wasn't living in Washington, so it wasn't something that weighed on me a lot. I remember Gene McCarthy, whom I was covering at that time, or had covered earlier, had said that he thought Lyndon was a bully and that Lyndon would cut and run when it came to it, when he knew he couldn't win. I think he could not win. I think that was clear and I think that Clark Clifford had fought against great odds to make clear the fact that the war could not be won. I think Clifford is a very heroic figure in that particular post-Tet period.

I think that it's a sad moment in history. I think Lyndon Johnson, for a variety of reasons, thought he could simply overwhelm the NVA and the Viet Cong. Vietnam was not just a quagmire; it turned out to be a tar baby. It destroyed his presidency.

But I have to tell you, all I remember thinking in those years was it's going to go on, it's going to go on. I had a profound sense that the Vietnamese had won, that the war was in effect over, that it was only a question of when America came to terms with it, that that which we had set out to do we could not do. So the only question was how much of a toll we were going to take of ourselves and of them before it finally ended. We could not destroy them; they would keep coming. So I did not see events as being determined, as so many American reporters did, in Washington. I saw them being determined in the field in Vietnam, where I thought the other side had all the dynamism. So in a sense it seemed to me that this was a welcome moment, because it meant we were being, as a nation, released from Lyndon Johnson's ego, which had become impaled upon that war. As I said, it wasn't just a quagmire, it was a tar baby, and one of the things that got impaled upon it was his ego.

G: Have you been back to Vietnam?

H: No, I haven't. I'm hoping to go sometime when my current book is done, in about two years.

G: What is the Pink Elephant Club?

H: Oh, it's a club in the British Embassy in Warsaw that they let me be a member in. Somewhere I've got a tie and you can go there and have a

beer and a sandwich. It was a little club in the basement of the British Embassy. It's the only club I belong to.

G: It seemed an interesting--

H: I knew sooner or later I'd get some club that would let me in. Okay?

G: Is there something you want to add, Mr. Halberstam?

H: No, I think that thing I added at the end was about as good as I can do. Fine. Thank you very much.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

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