INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD HELMS

INTERVIEWER: TED GITTINGER

PLACE: Ambassador Helms' office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Ambassador, if it's all right, we'll start.

H: Okay.

G: How far back does your association with the CIA go?

H: I was one of those individuals who had been with the SSU and therefore when the doors of CIA opened, I believe it was on September 20, 1947, I became one of the members of the CIA.

G: You said SSU. Now what was the connection of that with OSS?

H: OSS had two successor organizations. In other words, a part of OSS was disbanded and then what remained was divided into two parts, and they became known as the Strategic Services Unit of the State Department and the War Department. The State Department got what had been the research and analysis part of OSS. The War Department got secret intelligence, counter intelligence, communications and the sort of, if you like, clandestine component of OSS, or as much of it as had survived.

G: You would say the operational side of OSS?

H: That's right. That's right.

G: Okay.

H: So I had been with OSS. Then I was with SSU. Then when SSU was folded into CIA under the National Security Act of 1947, I became a member the first day.

G: Would you describe yourself as on the operational side or the intelligence side?

H: I was entirely on the operational side in those years.

G: Operational side. Okay.

Did you have any connection with the early missions to Indochina?

H: In the very earliest days of the agency I was much more involved in operations in Central Europe; I had very little to do with Asia.

G: Perhaps you can clear up one persistent story, and that is that the CIA flew resupply missions to the French in Dien Bien Phu in the last days.

H: I never heard of anything like this, and I doubt that it's true. I don't think that we were in any way organized at the time of Dien Bien Phu to have been assisting the French in any logistical way.

G: Well, I've asked a couple of military officers, retired now, who were there and they are adamant that they weren't flying the missions.

H: No, I don't place any stock in that story.

G: Okay. Do you have any association, or did you have association with some of the early field men working in Vietnam and Indochina?

H: The ones that I knew were those working there in the fifties, like John Richardson, Bill Colby, Nick Natsios, George Carver, people of that kind, Ed Lansdale. I knew all of those individuals.

I must say that in that particular period of the fifties I was not much involved in Asia, even though after I became chief of operations I was the number two on the clandestine or covert operational side of the house, whichever you want to call it. It was known in those days as the DDP--deputy director for plans. I tended to focus on certain other parts of the world more particularly, and was therefore not as preoccupied as I later became with precisely what was going on in Asia. In other words, I had a worldwide responsibility and the way the work was divided up in the agency at the time under Frank Wisner, I was doing a great many of those things on the operational side which had to do with the running of an organization. It was not so much its administration in that sense, but assignments, personnel problems, operational decisions in various parts of the world. I did not occupy myself a great deal with the policies involved at the time.

G: I see.

H: I might say that I am told--I have not read the book, but that a a fellow named Archimedes Patti, P-A-T-T-I, who was I believe with the OSS, whether he was later with the CIA, I don't recall anymore, but he has written a book about those early days in Indochina.

G: I think he was one of the ones who parachuted in to Ho Chi Minh.

H: I wouldn't be surprised, I wouldn't be surprised.

G: There are, of course, many stories told about how the Bay of Pigs affair affected the CIA. Did that affect your position at all?

H: Well, the Bay of Pigs affair had the effect on my position of getting me promoted, because I was the number two under Frank Wisner and I was the number two under Dick Bissell. As is probably relatively well known, both Allen Dulles and Dick Bissell were let go from the agency by President Kennedy because of the sad outcome of the Bay of Pigs. I believe that Allen Dulles actually was--the President let him go. I think John McCone, who had been Allen Dulles' successor, was the one who decided to dispense with the services not only of Pearre Cabelle, but also of Dick Bissell. In any event, it was under McCone that I was made the deputy director for plans, which in effect was the man who was in charge of what was known as the Clandestine Services.

G: Can you give me any idea of the sorts of programs that the CIA was sponsoring in Vietnam about that time? What kinds of things were going on?

H: The CIA was involved in Vietnam for a long time and in a variety of ways, running intelligence operations, working with tribal groupings, involved in various activities with the Vietnamese security services. And it varied from time to time, both as to the amount of manpower devoted to it and as to the level of activity. I think that you will do much better to talk to some of those people

who actually were participating at the time. I suggest George Carver to you. I think that you will find that Carver is a gold mine of information on Vietnam dating from the fifties all the way through to the end of President Johnson's Administration.

G: He's on my hit list. I have his name and number.

H: I think you will want to spend a good deal of time with him. He's got a good memory, he's extremely intelligent, and he was deeply versed in all these affairs. I would prefer to pass your inquiry on to someone else to get down to the details.

G: Fine, fine. It seems to me that around this time, and it partly is a result of the Bay of Pigs, there was a policy decision that the CIA should not be so involved in large scale paramilitary sorts of things. Is that correct?

H: There was no question about the fact that the Bay of Pigs taught everyone, whether they were involved directly or marginally, a lesson, and that is that when one undertakes a military operation in which actual troops, planes, logistics, training, all the rest of these things, are involved, that an organization like the CIA should not undertake such a mission, because they don't have the general staff system and the support mechanisms to underpin an activity of that kind and of that size involving that much support equipment, such as boats, airplanes, training camps and all the rest of it. But that did not affect the Kennedy Administration's view that CIA should do its best to handle the tribal dissidents in Laos, because after the Geneva accords there was

no way for the United States to be involved on a full military basis. So the CIA was selected by President Kennedy to work with the Meos and the tribes in Laos, and to do everything possible to keep a resistance against the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao organized there. In other words, to keep Laos from going communist.

Even though that activity became later known as the "secret war," I have rarely come across any greater nonsense than that. The Congress, the congressional committees to which directors of the CIA, or of Central Intelligence, which is the proper title, reported, knew about our activities in Laos from the very first day. They had to appropriate the money for it. The appropriations subcommittees were kept briefed in detail at regular intervals. And later on, when Senator Stuart Symington got up and started talking about a "secret war," he knew far better than that. In fact, he had been out to Laos on a couple of occasions to visit the installations that the agency had there. On one occasion he invited a man who was then the chief of station in Laos to come before the full Senate Armed Services Committee and tell it in great detail what the agency was doing in Laos. This was early on; this wasn't late in the game, this was early in the game. And the senators were very approving and felt it was a much cheaper and better way to fight a war in Southeast Asia than to commit American troops. The date of that meeting of the Senate committee is available but I don't know that it's particularly relevant to this oral history.

But let me put it this way as a final note. The CIA activities in Laos in the sixties and seventies were well known a) to key people in the administration, and b) to key members of Congress.

G: Let me pose a thesis to you: if the CIA had been left to run the war in Vietnam from the beginning, they would have done a much better job than the militarization that took place later.

H: It's awfully hard to answer a question like that. I would like to take advantage of the opportunity you've given me, but I do think that one has a problem here of making a comparison between unequal things. Let me put it this way. If the CIA work with the tribes and with the various Vietnamese units had been kept at a low level of civil war--and by civil war I'm not talking about civil war in the sense of Vietnamese versus Vietnamese, I'm talking about it at a level where military components, regular military units, do not get involved--I think that the CIA could have done a very good job of keeping the Viet Cong at bay. The problem was, though, that with the arrival of American troops, more North Vietnamese troops became involved. You have a little bit of a chicken and an egg situation, which came first and which came second, but that's not important. The war as later fought was on an entirely different scale from the way the CIA was attempting to fight it in the late fifties and early sixties. That's the way I'd like to answer your question. Since this is history, I don't think we ought to go overboard. There's been enough misconception about the war in Vietnam as it is.

G: Well, I'd propounded that thesis because it has been put forth by some highly placed people.

H: There is truth in it. If it had been allowed to run that course, it probably never would have escalated to the next level above.

G: Of course we don't know whether the communists would have escalated it or not.

H: That's the point.

G: Good.

In 1961 General Lansdale I think went on special mission--

H: Before you get to that, I'd like to say that--you have a question here whether there were disputes concerning what the CIA should or should not be doing in regard to activities in Vietnam and Laos. Back in the late fifties and early sixties on up through the Johnson Administration the arguments about how the CIA should be deployed in Southeast Asia were nonexistent. Everybody was anxious for them to do everything they possibly could. So that controversy arose much later.

G: Okay.

Were you familiar with the Lansdale report of 1961?

H: Yes, sure, because Lansdale, after his time in the Philippines, during which as you recall, he helped get President Magsaysay elected, he then went on to Saigon in the middle fifties. While he was there he obtained a fair reputation for himself as a fellow who knew how to operate and was good at teaming up with the

Vietnamese and staying behind the scenes, had been advising them on political warfare and covert action and things of this kind. So when he went back again, was sent back again and wrote this report in 1961, obviously it attracted a good deal of attention. Also, the Kennedy brothers thought Lansdale was a pretty unusual fellow in that he understood these things a lot better than most people and that one should depend on Lansdale as the man who was a good initiator of proper work with locals and how to influence them and how to affect them and so forth. Lansdale's program, as I recall it now, his recommendation was for what later turned out to be known variously but I guess the most familiar term is pacification. I believe that when he made that report, that was about the time that Dan Ellsberg was involved in these matters in Vietnam. But in any event, it was widely read in government, let's put it that way.

G: You don't have to answer this if you don't like, and I'll understand why you wouldn't, but Lansdale was a rather legendary figure I think in the press and popularly, although I think Graham Greene didn't think as much of him as a good many other people and saw him as rather a sinister figure than otherwise. But within the CIA, was his reputation equally illustrious?

H: He was well regarded in the CIA, but one must realize that those who were working side by side with him and examining exactly what was going on did not think that he was the hot ticket that a lot of other people did. Lansdale was a very good promoter,

and he was a very good promoter of Lansdale. One can't blame a person for being that. I'm not being critical, I'm just stating a fact. But those who worked side by side with him didn't believe that he was the miracle worker that other people made him out to be.

G: The clay feet became more visible the closer you got with him.

H: And later on, you know, he became very much involved in the Cuban operations of the Kennedy Administration, Operation Mongoose and various others that have become well known now, and obviously he did not shine up his reputation in those activities.

G: I believe he has since recorded that he was very much opposed to the Bay of Pigs operation. Do you have any knowledge of that?

H: I have no knowledge of that one way or the other.

G: Now later in 1961 there was another famous mission to Vietnam, the Maxwell Taylor-Walt Rostow mission. Did CIA have any input into that?

H: I think that CIA had an input into everything to the extent that people obviously went around and talked to the CIA officers. They did not have an official input as papers written in headquarters and added to these reports, but obviously people were talked to, and in the Taylor-Rostow mission to which you refer here, I have no doubt that they did talk with the people that were in Vietnam for the CIA at that time. I never actually saw this report as best I can recollect, I think I was briefed on it orally. It obviously had an influence on President Kennedy, there wasn't any doubt about that.

I don't know whether that is precisely the reason, but at least it is one of the contributing reasons why the United States got more militarily involved in the whole Vietnamese affair.

G: I bring that up because Mr. Colby has written that he had been off to a meeting in the Philippines and only got a few minutes with-- I don't know who he talked to on the Taylor-Rostow team, but in any case, he arrived back in Saigon just in time as they were leaving, and he seems to feel that the real CIA solution or opinion in Vietnam didn't get much attention as a result of that. Do you have any recollection of that?

H: I have no recollection of that whatsoever. I must confess that I get a little bit tired of all this hindsight that people try to put into history these days to prove that they were right. I was fascinated to read last night an article in Encounter magazine written by a man named Robert Elegant--

G: He's a British journalist, I believe.

H: --in which he blames the U.S. press for giving a totally distorted version of the Vietnamese war and makes his case very eloquently.

G: I believe that's entitled "How to Lose a War," isn't it?

H: Yes. Have you read that?

G: Yes, sir.

H: Well, I think it's a fascinating article. I think that President Johnson would agree with every word of it.

G: There are some fascinating inserts in that article, too, as I recall, about the role of doubles in the South Vietnamese government.

H: Well, I'm glad you have a copy of that article because I think it's an important one.

G: I think it is, too.

Now, there was hot debate in the Kennedy Administration about the suitability of President Ngo Dinh Diem, I believe.

H: Yes.

G: Was the debate equally contested within the CIA about how suitable Diem was?

H: One of the problems that you--and I mean you as the oral historian--must keep in mind, I think, is that John McCone, who was director of Central Intelligence at this period, was a man who believed that he had two hats. One hat was running the agency and the other hat was as one of the President's policy makers. But he was the only one at the agency who felt that way. Now what his various inputs into matters of this kind may have been, orally and otherwise, is a little hard for me to assess. As for the operational people in the agency, I don't think that you would have found any consensus that President Diem should have been let go. I think our feeling at the time was that this immolation of the Buddhist monks was a lot of window dressing, that it received far too much attention from President Kennedy and Averell Harriman and various people in Washington who were working on these matters at the time, and that the move the administration made, in that famous telegram the date of which I've now forgotten--

G: I think that's the August 24 [1963] telegram.

H: I wouldn't be surprised. But this is a telegram devised by Averell Harriman and I think there was also some input probably from--

G: Was it Roger Hilsman perhaps?

H: --Roger Hilsman, and I don't know the extent that Mike Forrestal played a role in this. But in any event, that telegram was pushed through the various policy makers and the various people with whom it would normally have been cleared in government, pretty much as though President Kennedy had already approved it. If you wanted to object and go to him, you could object, but the thing to do was stand aside. This was a truck that was rolling down the road. It was this telegram, I haven't the slightest doubt, that ended the career of President Diem finally. Now in saying what I have said I don't want to be guilty of a lot of hindsight, but as best I can recall the atmosphere at the time, and we would sit at the table in the White House hearing these things debated, this immolation of the Buddhist monks received far more attention and was played up as a reason why Diem and particularly his brother, [Ngo Dinh] Nhu should be got rid of. As so frequently happens in life, you succeed in getting rid of one but who do you get in his place? After that we had a revolving door of prime ministers in Vietnam, which certainly did not help the American cause at all.

Now I'm not pointing a finger, a critical finger, at anyone, because I can understand the political reasons why certain of these decisions may well have been taken. But I'm simply saying that

these people did focus on this, there was much discussion of it, and that I'm sure the decisions that were made were made very thoughtfully. So I'm not being critical, I'm simply responding to your notion that the operational people who were knowledgeable about Vietnam were far more reluctant to see Diem got rid of than the other people were, the political figures in the government. As one looks back on those events, the field operatives were fairly critical in the way things went in Vietnam after this time, I mean from that time onward. I think one must come to the conclusion that whatever Diem may have represented, whatever his brother Nhu and Madame Nhu represented, Vietnam under their aegis was a stronger political entity than it was later.

G: Could Diem have been sustained, do you think?

H: Have been sustained?

G: Could he have been kept [in power]? A lot of people were saying that he--

H: I don't know any reason why not.

G: Okay.

H: And all of the allegations--I guess they come in subsequent questions here, but we might just as well hit them now--the allegations that the agency was responsible for unseating Diem. That was absolutely untrue. As a matter of fact, there was no agency desire particularly. We were following orders and we were doing what we were supposed to do, but we had no role in this. The Harriman telegram had to do with economic support and so forth. It was the Vietnamese who got

together and chopped up Diem and Nhu.

But what the agency role at that time was, if it had any role at all, was that Lucien Conein--he's known as Luigi Conein--was put on the job of keeping in touch with some of the dissident generals in Vietnam at the time. After all, we were responsible for the collection of intelligence, we weren't responsible for being the nice guys and dealing just with the government the way the embassy does. We were trying to keep our lines out into all parts of South Vietnam. He happened to have a bird cat seat at what went on in those days, because he had been tipped off that there was going to be some trouble. He reported from an intelligence standpoint what the events were, and he did a good job of it. But he was under no instructions and did nothing whatever to assist this whole process of unseating Diem.

If this oral history is useful, it's to put to rest once and for all some of the reports that have been kicking around these years which seem incendiary and exciting and all the rest of it. But it simply is not true that the agency had anything to do with the assassination of Diem and Nhu. I believe John McCone as director had an entire study written of that affair to demonstrate that the agency was not responsible for this. But that study aside, I'll just tell you as one of the fellows who was not only theoretically but practically in charge of the operational people out there, I just know it isn't true.

G: I'm going to ask you a standard question I ask everybody. Who killed President Diem?

H: I don't know.

G: That's the usual answer I get.

H: I don't know who killed him.

G: Although I have about eight other candidates that have been put forward, the most frequent answer is that nobody knows.

Had Diem's brother, Nhu, been secretly trying to make a deal with Hanoi? That's been reported in a few places.

H: I don't know. We were not aware of it at the time if he was. But on the other hand, no sane man wants to sit in a chair and say that one Vietnamese hasn't been dealing with another Vietnamese. I have no doubt that there were elements in South Vietnam that were working for the communists, that were agents and sleepers and agents of influence and all kinds of people under Hanoi's control. Somehow or other I don't see Nhu trying to make a deal with Hanoi, but that's just on form. I don't know whether he did or whether he didn't. I would think that he did not.

G: It has been suggested to me that Nhu was capable of virtually any kind of Byzantine intrigue.

H: Well, that was exactly what is alleged, but that's sort of a popularized version of a fellow who had a very strong and articulate wife and who was obviously a fairly devious Oriental. Why we in the West insist on categorizing various people as being capable of anything in our terms, when by Oriental standards he probably was no worse than a lot of other people. We just don't understand these cultures, and we are in many respects silly in our comments about them.

G: How much is there to the sinister sort of aspect that is reported of Nhu so often in the popular books and press? You see him as the bad guy, the guy who led Diem astray and so on.

H: Well, I don't know the merits of that case. I think it would be far better to get that story from somebody who knew him a lot better than I did. I simply am putting up the cautionary flag that American reaction to Orientals is usually rather juvenile.

G: I think that's very, very true.

From my reading of the documents at the LBJ Library, after the coup the CIA cables seemed to focus entirely on political developments. I don't know if there was a policy decision or--

H: Oh, I think that was a passing phenomenon. In intelligence work, as it's presently constituted in the United States government, when there's a hot affair going on, the president and other officials start shouting for information. One of the quickest ways to get it is to ask the CIA fellows to get it, because the other reporting mechanisms in most cases seem to be so slow. Obviously when Diem and Nhu were assassinated, this was a most important event to the whole administration as to what had happened, why it had happened, where it had happened and so forth. So it was only natural that we would be sending queries out constantly saying find out this, find out that, who did this, who did that, where was Conein at such and such a time, are you sure he didn't have anything to do with this, et cetera? No, I think that was just a passing phenomenon, a reaction to the events of time.

You know, there's a very interesting sidelight in connection with this whole affair of Diem. President Johnson, for reasons which are totally unclear to me, had some kind of belief or conviction, I don't know how strong it was, that because President Kennedy had been in a sense responsible for Diem's demise, he in turn was assassinated himself. I mean, it was a strange and rather bizarre view he held. I don't know how convinced he was about it, but I've heard him say it, and it rather surprised me because I was wondering exactly how he'd put this together in his head. Since I had great respect for President Johnson, I didn't know whether this was just like the fly fisherman flick over the water to see if it has any takers, or whether he really believed it.

G: Sort of a divine retribution aspect, do you think?

H: That's the idea. That's the idea.

G: Well, I have heard the remark quoting him many times, "they've done it over there and now they're doing it here" or something to that effect. Of course, President Johnson never specified who "they" were, it was always "they."

Can we talk about Laos a little bit? Realizing of course that you were not the operational man on the spot and were not perhaps handling the nuts and bolts of this thing, but were there policy problems involved in arming and training the tribesmen that we recruited in Laos?

H: My direct answer to that is that the agency, working closely with the ambassador on the scene and with the military attache in the

embassy, was flat out in its effort to keep the tribes viable militarily in that Plain of Jars area of Laos. You remember the agency had a base at Long Tieng--and it is L-O-N-G and T-I-E-N-G, it isn't a lot of the other things it's been called. That was the operational base where General--

G: Was it Vang Pao?

H: --Vang Pao had his base and where the logistics support was provided, where the airplanes could come in with additional supplies and the whole affair was run from there. This was a major operation for the agency, as you can imagine. It took manpower, it took specially-qualified manpower, it was dangerous, it was difficult. One was living in the boonies, a long way from Broadway, and I think frankly the agency did a superb job. I don't normally go around trying to praise this or criticize that particularly; I try to keep things on an even keel. But I do think that over the years it was a remarkable job that the agency did, with support from Air America and the United States Army; the whole government worked together with CIA in the lead. And when you read the history of that war factually, I think you will agree with me that it was a superb job.

G: There has been a lot of speculation about the opium traffic that was so notorious in this area. Weren't some of the tribes involved in that trade?

H: There is no argument that many of the Meo tribes raised opium. After all, opium was indigenous to that area and areas in Thailand

and Burma and Vietnam around and about Laos. I have no doubt that the Meos trafficked in drugs at various times, but they did not do it with the CIA's blessing or with the CIA's connivance. There have also been allegations that pilots for Air America flew opium in and out of places like Laos. I don't know the merits of this charge. It was certainly not condoned. If they did it, they did it behind the backs of their superiors. There may have been a little bit of this, but I can assure you that they were very brave and courageous fellows who flew those Air America helicopters and planes. They landed in fields that you would never regard as air fields. They were doing this constantly, and they were supporting troops under fire. They were an extremely able bunch of airmen, there is no doubt about it, and if one or two of them got off the reservation at some time or other, I don't know the merits of the case. But I do know that the agency was not conniving or condoning any drug smuggling.

It's one of the things that I think probably irritates me more than any of the allegations against the agency, and that is that we were involved in the drug traffic at any time. We never were! After all, the people who ran the agency, the people who worked in various places on the operational side all over the world, were perfectly decent Americans. You have to go through a security clearance, you have to go through a psychological check, you have to go through a lie detector test, you have to go through a physical examination, you have to do all of these things to get into the agency in the first place. They were a perfectly decent bunch

of human beings. They know very well what drugs do to people in the United States and what they have done to our society and so forth, and none of them had any desire to connive in that kind of business or to make our domestic problems worse. These allegations are just simply irresponsible.

G: On the other side, did CIA get requests to furnish intelligence to other agencies on the drug traffic so that it could be suppressed?

H: Yes. And we offered all kinds of information to them about drug smuggling in the Golden Triangle, and we gave information to elements in the United States government so that if they wanted to, they could raid these camps and so forth. I once reported to Senator [John] Stennis, who at that time was chairman of the Armed Services Committee and therefore the committee to which the agency reported, that we were doing everything we could to help the drug enforcement agencies and various other elements of the government in this field. He paused after I had said this and shook his head and said, "I'm not sure you people ought to be getting involved in things like that. I don't know that that's a proper activity for you." I said, "Well, Mr. Chairman, how could we possibly not help the United States government when we've got such a hideous drug problem in this country?" In any event, we did help.

G: This is a conjecture. Isn't it possible that an agent on the ground could be put in a very tight spot if he knows that someone he is supporting, a tribesman, let us say, is dealing in drugs in some

way and gets a request to furnish information. Where does he go in such a case?

H: Those decisions arose every day, but one tried to resolve them one at a time on as sensible and rational a basis as possible. But the drug thing we were particularly sensitive to. Whereas we might have condoned some fiddle-faddle about something else on the part of some agent or other, we were doing our best to stamp out drug smuggling.

G: Can you describe in sort of broad-brush terms the role that the North Vietnamese were playing in Laos in the early sixties before the accords were signed?

H: The North Vietnamese a) were supporting the Pathet Laos military forces, and b) they had troops in areas of Northern Laos. The North Vietnamese never honored the accords; they had no intention of honoring them. What they wanted to do with these accords was to make it difficult for the United States, not to make it difficult for themselves. If one examines the history of this period, I don't think there was any question that President Kennedy made the right decision when he said the CIA has got to get in there and do everything it possibly can in a civilian way to support these tribespeople and other elements in Laos who were fighting against the Pathet Lao and against the North Vietnamese. Because whether they're in Pathet Lao uniforms, or whether they're Pathet Lao supported by the North Vietnamese, or whether they're North Vietnamese in uniform, it's the communists wanting to take over Laos.

G: So neither side observed the accords, except I believe your statement is that we tried initially.

H: We did try. We found out that this was an absolute loser and that we were going to lose Laos.

G: Did we have any idea how large the North Vietnamese presence was in Laos, even in gross terms?

H: I don't recall how accurate the order of battle in those days was, but I would have thought it was--in order of magnitude we probably had it reckoned accurately. I don't think we were mistaken much about that. We could fly air reconnaisance missions and get information from the tribespeople and so forth. I think we had it fairly accurately bracketed. And we must have had, because we were able to fight them off.

G: Yes. I've seen the figure 70,000 at a high point.

H: I've forgotten what the figures are, and I wouldn't want to be stuck with those now.

G: What was the connection between the insurgency in South Vietnam and the war in Laos in the early days?

H: In the early days I don't believe there was much connection at all, except to the extent that the North Vietnamese were supporting the Viet Cong in the South and the Pathet Lao in Laos. So that is a connection. But as far as the United States was concerned there was not a great deal of--well, let me put it this way, there was no reason for the people working with the tribespeople in South Vietnam to be very much involved with the people working with the

tribespeople in Laos. Maybe the distance isn't great as the crow flies, but it's a long way on the road or on the river. Except to the extent that supplies and so forth may have been shared and guns sent to both places and things of this kind, I would have seen no particular connection at that time.

G: Was infiltration a very important factor in those early days, the early sixties, from the North to the South down the [Ho Chi Minh] Trail?

H: I think infiltration was always a problem. I would liken infiltration to a river which swells and recedes; sometimes it was just a trickle, sometimes it was a flood, but it was always a problem. It wasn't only a question of manpower, it was a question of logistics, guns as well.

G: There was, I know, a debate over how important the infiltration was in the early days. That is, what was the role of the North in the South in the early days of the insurgency before the PAVN units began coming down?

H: I don't think there's any doubt that we were not a hundred per cent sure about a lot of these things even to this day. And how in the world would you know exactly what you were dealing with in the Vietnamese? He's got a Vietnamese physiognomy, he may have on these clothes, those clothes, that uniform. Does he represent the North? Does he represent the South? Is he with the North? Is he against the North? Is he playing both sides against the middle? What does he represent? What was this all about? This is one of

the reasons that I believe it was so very difficult to make a good case to the American people about the character of this war. And the reporting, which we saw in our newspapers and on the television, was so gummed up and much of it so inaccurate and so sensational that it caused a vast confusion. Whereas for those people on the ground who were actually working on these matters, it was a devilish problem. Is Gittinger a Hanoi agent in the South, or is he really on our side? Now how do you tell that in somebody else's society, particularly one as Oriental, as old, as used to dealing with foreigners in a hands-off way as the Vietnamese.

I might say, if you would like an observation in hindsight, that the great sadness of the entire affair in Vietnam was not--this is all my opinion--that the United States went in there and tried to help the South Vietnamese maintain their freedom, and was not that we felt that this was an opportunity to show strength against the communism from the North which was pushing down into Southeast Asia. But it was the fact that we were dealing with a complicated cultural and ethnic problem which we never came to understand. In other words, it was our ignorance or innocence, if you like, which led us to mis-assess, not comprehend, and make lot of wrong decisions, which one way or another helped to affect the outcome.

As one looks back on the whole Vietnamese war, I think it very important to look at Southeast Asia today. I agree with Lee Kuan Yew, the prime minister of Singapore, that American firmness in

South Vietnam permitted Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines to maintain their independence, to get themselves straightened out from the effects of World War II. And now look at the economic prosperity of that part of the world. The A-S-E-A-N or Asean nations are doing extremely well. Vietnam is a basket case. So is Cambodia. Laos not much better. That those nations that had a chance to get their legs under them and get themselves organized and get their industry going and their commerce going and their trade going are now in great shape. And they owe that to the United States. In other words, that was a very important by-product of this whole affair in Vietnam.

G: If I interpret you correctly, you're saying we gained everything we would have lost if we didn't fight?

H: That's just about right.

G: Did CIA help prepare the State Department White Paper on the North's role in the South? I think this was about 1964. That's the one that Ambassador William Jorden, I believe, is credited with the authorship of the thing.

H: I would have assumed we did help on this. I think the job was primarily done at the State Department under the aegis of Bill Bundy, wasn't it, William Bundy, who was there at the time?

G: Well, there was more than one White Paper.

H: Was this the 1963-64 one?

G: I think so. I think it's the one that I. F. Stone did such a critical job on.

H: These details I don't remember. I believe that State had the laboring oar although I have no doubt that the agency contributed.

G: Do you have any feel for the situation in South Vietnam today? Are you able to keep track of things any better than the average citizen reading the Washington Post?

H: No. I have no inside information about what's going on there. I know only what I've read in the daily press, daily newspapers. Obviously, I'm keenly aware of the boat people, because after all, one gets constant letters from the International Rescue Committee and other organizations to help out in the resettlement of these refugees. I can only assume that Vietnam is in some respects a basket case economically, and obviously the people are not doing well, otherwise they wouldn't be fleeing. You may say they might be doing well but they don't like the political system and therefore they're fleeing, it's all part and parcel of the same thing. Politics, economics and so forth go together, and if these people don't like the living conditions in South Vietnam, what difference does it make whether it's one banana more a day or something else. If they liked the system, they'd stay even if they were hungry. So I can only say that when the United States pulled out and the North Vietnamese took over, it was a disaster for the people who lived in South Vietnam.

(Interruption)

G: Go ahead, sir.

H: I simply want to comment on one controversy that was raged about American policy in Vietnam. And in doing so I want to make it clear at the outset that I have the greatest regard and respect for Clark Clifford. I like Tim [Townsend] Hoopes very much. I regard both of them as friends, I think they regard me as a friend. So what I'm saying has no personal overtones whatever and is not intended to be critical. It simply has to do with the facts of the case. I believe that Hoopes in his book [The Limits of Intervention] makes the contention that it was Clark Clifford who was responsible for "turning President Johnson around," on the Vietnamese war during the short period that he, Clifford, was secretary of defense.

Hoopes asked me about this point before he ever wrote his book. I told him I did not believe this to be the case. I had never seen any evidence of it, I was in all the meetings, I believed that President Johnson had come to his own conclusions for his own reasons. There was no single individual who had set him on one course or the other or been the one who influenced him most in this direction. Despite my stating that, Hoopes went ahead with his book and I believe Clifford was the one who was responsible for giving him that point of view. I know that later, after he was out of office, President Johnson, when I was at the Ranch one time, asked me whether or not I knew of any particular papers or notes I might have taken in meetings which would help clarify this matter. So I realized from what he said to me on that occasion that President Johnson didn't believe this was true either. I mention this, because I think that

in an effort to nail down some of these things, it is useful for you to have my view of the situation or of what transpired.

G: By all means.

H: Another thing: on the slightly amusing side, you're aware of President Johnson's inclination when he didn't like somebody or something that that somebody had done, to get his name wrong on purpose. I remember on the occasion of Marie Fehmer's bridal dinner in Washington my wife Cynthia was sitting next to President Johnson. He suddenly turned to her and said, "Cynthia, who is the fellow Hoopeez?" pronouncing it H-O-O-P-E-E-Z. So it was quite clear that the line Hoopes took in his book was not congenial to President Johnson. That's all I've got to say on the subject.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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