

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 15, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: ROGER HILSMAN

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Hilsman's office at Columbia University, New York

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M: Let's begin by identifying you, sir. You're Roger Hilsman, and your last official position with the government was as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs which you held until of 1964. Is that correct?

H: No, March 15th. I actually resigned earlier than that, but the President asked me to stay till March 15th while he got a replacement.

M: And you had been director of the I & R [Intelligence and Research] from the beginning of the Kennedy Administration until 1963?

H: Right.

M: So you served about a year in the Far East post.

H: Just a little over.

M: Did you know Mr. Johnson at all prior to the time you came into the Kennedy Administration? Had you ever had any contact?

H: I had had some indirect contact with him when he was on Capitol Hill. I was chief of the Foreign Affairs Division of the Legislative Reference Service, and then I was deputy director of the Service. And though I didn't know him personally, I had done some things with some of his staff.

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It was funny about this, because William S. White, you know, Bill White, was a great friend of the President's. And he's a great friend of mine. Bill White always thought we two would really hit it off. White arranged a real small dinner party early in the Kennedy Administration. It was Bill and his wife, my wife and myself, Jim Rowe and Lady Bird and the Vice President. The whole purpose of this dinner was to get his two good friends together. We talked about Texas and not much else except Texas. You see, my grandfather, my family comes from Texas--both sides.

M: That should have been a plus.

H: Well, except I have no accent. My father was an army officer, and although I was born in Texas, we lived all over the world.

M: Like Eisenhower's birthplace was Texas.

H: Yes, that's right. And the President didn't know my grandfather. My grandfather had been chief justice of the Criminal Court of Appeals in Texas. His portrait hangs in the Capitol at Austin. In fact, I have two relatives whose portraits hang in the Capitol.

M: But Johnson didn't know him?

H: Didn't know him. And I was amazed at that. Didn't know him and didn't know of him. Of course, I should have phrased that more carefully: didn't know of him because, after all, he died in 1923. I would have thought that he would have known of him anyway, but he didn't.

But it's funny about that evening, because my memory of it is that it was inconsequential. We never talked about anything

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substantive or anything else. But after I resigned and was a critic, friends in the press tell me that Johnson tells a story about that evening that I just don't remember anything remotely like. I know it didn't happen the way he told it. Although he does these things, you know. That is, he sees it differently. Let me tell you the way it came back to me was that at the dinner we got to talking about Vietnam or the military or something like this. And we disagreed. I was supposed to have said, "Mr. Vice President, you're full of shit," or something to this effect. Well, A., as a West Pointer Army officer, I couldn't do anything like that. I'm just incapable of it. But knowing Mr. Johnson, I could well visualize, with his personality, that if you have said, "I just don't agree; you're just wrong," that that would be the functional equivalent of saying, "You're full of shit." I think that what must have happened--which also happens with him, as you know, frequently--is that in meetings about Vietnam, there were disagreements and that he transferred those in his mind. In other words, I don't think he was deliberately manufacturing anything. But I think he was confusing it later, much, much later, with NSC meetings or other meetings when he was vice president and there were disagreements. You know, just transposing it into the other scene. But that's when I first really [met him]; the first intimate occasion.

M: Had he been to Vietnam? Was this after his Vietnam trip that year?

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H: It must have been, must have been.

M: So he was knowledgeable about it? I mean he had some knowledge about it.

H: But my point is I am absolutely certain we didn't discuss Vietnam that night.

M: Right. Did you talk to him about his trip at any time subsequently?

H: No, there are a couple of funny things about my early relationship with the Vice President. They really are kind of misses. Because it is perfectly true what White said, that there were things in both of our backgrounds that would have made it logical for us to have hit it off. I mean, just things like I know Texas. My father and Johnson are very similar personalities. Dad grew up not a couple of hundred miles from where Johnson was born and grew up. And they're very much the same. In fact, I'm often struck that Johnson is eleven years older than I am, but he is really of my father's generation. He's that kind of a Texan, you see. My only point thus being that I, unlike, say, some of the Kennedy people, understood this personality. I had known very intimately my father and people like this, and so, therefore, I could have adjusted. And I admired him.

But there were just a couple of just kind of misses. For example, I went out to Vietnam, and after having talked with R. K. G. Thompson, came back with some ideas that lumped under the strategic hamlet program thing which had some promises of winning. Of course, one of the issues was that I was always

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convinced after that trip--I had been a guerrilla leader in World War II and taking these two experiences, I became convinced that it could be won, but not by conventional military means. It had to be done by adopting tactics of the guerrilla by arming the villagers, the strategic hamlet type program.

M: Your book is a very clear enunciation of that.

H: Yes, on that. Well, one of the other things that happened that was kind of funny was that when I got back, I talked to the President at great length, and the President--

M: Wait a minute, you talked to Mr. Kennedy now?

H: Kennedy, yes. Talked to Kennedy at great length about this with Max Taylor. Kennedy said, "I want you to go around and see Bobby and several other people and give them this briefing." And he named the Vice President. So I set up an appointment to give him a full briefing on this whole new concept. And it was just one of those damned things. I arrived at his office, and there was some sort of political crisis going on in Texas. He was all tensed up; the telephone would ring every two minutes. He'd come over and sit down and say, "Okay. Go ahead." Then two minutes later he'd jump up and call a secretary and say something like that and then come and say, "Now, what were you saying?" And then the telephone would ring.

M: I've had some interviews like that on this project.

H: It was just a total flop, you know. I think that right there, if it had worked out so that I could have had an hour with him,

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he would have understood better the nature of the problem [Vietnam] when he did become president. Well, there were a series of episodes like this where it just sailed by.

Then, when I was director of I & R, I got to thinking about him and tried to arrange to give him an intelligence briefing on a regular basis. Somehow this news was never picked up. Then on several NSC meetings, he used to sit next to me, and we would whisper back and forth about what was going on. But then, after I got to be assistant secretary, it really . . . you know, the struggle over the whole Buddhist crisis with the military and NSC. Everybody was split. The CIA split down the middle about how to handle the Buddhist crisis. And the military wanted to go on with Diem and, of course, the political situation. I think the then-Vice President Johnson, having met Diem and liked him, and the famous quote about the Churchill of Asia. Of course, that was true about a lot of us. I knew Diem and liked him, too. But being, by this time, assistant secretary and being very intimately concerned with the political side of the question, why, I, went along with [W. Averell] Harriman and [Dean] Rusk and the others in the State Department became increasingly convinced that we couldn't sit still. We had to say something, had to do something. And I think that there were a couple of NSC meetings where Johnson's sympathies were with the military and with Diem. I think that probably was the period in which he disagreed with what I was saying.

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I don't recall any episode where he became an advocate and I disagreed with him. But I can recall lots of meetings where he sat silently as McNamara and I fought, or the JCS and I fought, and so on and so forth. And I had the feeling that his sympathies lay with the other side. But I really think that there is an enormous tragedy here that somehow--I'm speaking from hindsight now and I'm speaking on the assumption that it turns out that those of us who thought bombing would not work, that those of us who thought that American troops would merely drive -- you know no matter how many Viet Cong you killed that the use of troops foreign to Vietnam would drive the peasants into the arms of the communists. I'm assuming that that now turns out to have been correct. And my feeling was that the time that Mr. Johnson could have been influenced was no later than 1962.

M: In other words, long before he became president.

H: That's right.

M: A full year before.

H: My impression is that when he became president his mind was made up, and that people like Harriman and myself were just simply going to be out of it: Harriman put on a shelf, you know, Harriman couldn't be fired, you couldn't fire Harriman, but put on a shelf, taken out of it. Of course, Harriman was an old man and had the patience and also had the wisdom to know that he would have to be the one to be sent to the negotiations when they came. He had the patience to wait. And because of the

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high esteem in which he was held by the Soviets, [he] knew that he gotten to be [and would be] indispensable when the negotiations came and that LBJ would have to come to him.

But I have the impression that when Johnson became president, his mind had been made up that the people he was going to listen to were the guys with the military hard line and that he was not going to listen to any others. I don't say that he had determined on escalating. I don't think he did. I think that that first year he wished very much that there would be a victory on the same terms as JFK's policy. But I do think that he had made up his mind not to listen to the guys who argued that it was a political problem and not a military problem and that if there was a crisis that he would listen to the military advice.

M: How much was he in on the Kennedy Administration consideration of the problem? You mentioned his being in the meetings, but was it any more than that or was he in on the really important meetings even?

H: I don't know. I'm sure that you could find this out. But my impression was that he had a standing invitation to all NSC meetings.

M: Of course, there were not always the important ones, I suppose?

H: Well, I think they were pretty important.

M: Were they?

H: Yes, important in this sense: that when you've got a divided government, when the military and the CIA and the State Department



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are divided about these matters, then any president has got to go through a certain amount of motions of maintaining some unity. Because, you know, if somebody resigns in a public blast that these decisions were made without proper consultation, why, that's hard on any president. So my feeling is that maybe Bobby and Jack had some private conversations that were very crucial. But nevertheless, both in the Cuban Missile Crisis and in the whole Vietnam business, my impression was that the importance of keeping the government together was so great that those NSC meeting were very important.

Now, I think that the Vice President didn't come to all of them. And I don't know about the invitation; my impression was he had a standing invitation. Again, you know, maybe we should have pushed hard, maybe I should have pushed harder when I was director of Intelligence to give him a regular briefing. I tried several times, but he didn't pick it up. Of course, the Vice President has always got these problems, you know.

M: Oh, yes, that's inherent in the office, I suppose .

H: Inherent in the office, that's right.

M: You go into this in some extent in the book. I take it that what you say is that at the time Johnson became president, the die had not been cast. In other words, he could have--it would have been possible to have adopted the course of action that you were recommending at that time. It was not already set. Is that a fair understanding of it?

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H: Well, now look, nobody can prove anything.

M: Right.

H: Because these are matters of judgement.

I'll tell you what I thought at the time. That is, I remember, after the Diem coup, John McCone and I having a talk about this. And I remember saying that all that this had done was give us a second chance and that we now had to press very hard. I wrote a memo, as I described in the book, following the Diem coup, urging that certain steps be done. Now, I don't know, and nobody knows, whether it was too late, whether the strategic hamlet program would have worked if it had been pursued energetically. Nobody knows. I clung to that hope, and I clung to that hope for a long time, as my public statements will reveal. Even as late as 1966, I probably still thought there was a chance. And increasingly, I became more and more pessimistic and visited Vietnam in late summer of 1967, and came back. This was the period where the optimism was very high before the Tet Offensive, but I have been around the race course many times. I came back admitting that there had been a lot of military progress, but even more deeply pessimistic about whether this was going to be relevant. By that time I began to have real doubts--in the fall of 1967--whether it was too late for anything. Now let me say one other thing though. In late 1964, early 1965, came the crisis of morale. Now, I tell you quite frankly at the time and now, I have doubts about whether it was really a crisis.

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M: You have doubts about the degree of deterioration in South Vietnam.

H: That's right. In other words, I think that in late 1964, 1965-- I'm not nailing my colors to the mast on it, I only say that I have real doubts as to whether it wasn't a temporary thing. I don't think necessarily, I really don't in my heart believe that a collapse would have followed. I think there was still time for an energetic strategic hamlet program in 1965. But let us assume that I am wrong on that. Let us assume that there was a crisis. My feeling is that it's very difficult to change an ongoing policy in the absence of some climax, some crisis. What I mean by that is that if you say, "Let's go to Paris. Let's go to Geneva and negotiate Vietnam." Bob Kennedy said this once, in November before the Diem coup. And somebody said, "Well, let's play it out along this line a little while longer. We've got time. It isn't that . . . So my point is--

M: Fifteen minutes more.

H: Yes.

M: You have the "fifteen-minutes-more" theory.

H: Yes. Well, that's right. But the point here is that I define a crisis for these purposes as when both the hawks and the doves agree that doing what you're doing isn't going to work and that you must go big. Now in that kind of circumstance, then a president finally is free, you see; he's finally free to make a bold change. Now whether or not there really was a collapse

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of morale in South Vietnam in late 1964 and early 1965, all agreed that there was. All the Washington people did, both the hawks and the doves. Now at that point, Mr. Johnson could have gone to Geneva as easily as he escalated the war.

M: That's the freedom that you were talking about.

H: That's the freedom and he was perfectly free to negotiate. My feeling was that there was his great mistake, because I think, quite frankly, that we'd have gotten maybe more out of those negotiations of 1965 than we'll get out of these. And the reason is because the North Vietnamese had never experienced the bombing, never experienced five hundred thousand Americans, and they would have been fearful of it. They would have been under the threat. The threat is always worse than the actuality. They might have been more willing to negotiate under those circumstances than they are now. Now they've had the bombing, and they've survived it. Now they have had five hundred thousand Americans, and they've taken their measure, and they know they can cope. That means I think we would have been better off negotiating.

M: Was anybody advising him to get out in 1964?

H: I left in March, 1964, so I don't know about that period.

M: But even during the period before you left, was there any counsel at all? Later on all of his critics at least would say we should have withdrawn. Was anybody ever saying that inside?

H: No, no. I don't think so.

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M: I think that's important too.

H: That's very important.

M: That there wasn't any advice of this given.

H: Yes. When I put in my memo when I left--my sort of political testament--the thesis of this memo was: Don't bomb the North; it won't work; it will be interpreted as an act of desperation, and it will force you into premature negotiations.

M: Yes, you mentioned that. Right.

H: That's March, 1964, because Walt Rostow and the others were already putting pressure on the President to bomb the North. Now, my point about that was that it would be interpreted as an act of desperation, an admission that everything failed in the South, and that it would not work. But it would start the neutralist hares running both among our allies and at home. So I was advising, at that time . . . Now that was in the absence of a crisis.

M: Right.

H: I don't know what advice he was getting in late 1964 or early 1965. My advice, if I had been there, would have been to ride it, you know, to again try the strategic hamlet program. But I certainly would have advised against bombing the North. Now, if riding it, and it turned out there was a real crisis, a real collapse in morale, why, then I would have thought that you had to negotiate. Because, you see, I always thought that you never really had the option of introducing American troops, that even if the

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American troops won the battle, you'd simply just have to occupy the country for the rest of time. The minute you turned your back, it would go down the drain because of the use of American troops. My analogy always was that if the President of the United States at the time of the Watts riots had called on Prime Minister Saito to send five hundred thousand Japanese over here, we'd have all been on the barricades.

M: Right, right. In your book, one of the time periods in which you don't go into a great deal of detail is the period from Mr. Johnson taking over until your departure. And yet, you say you felt sure during that time his basic decision had been made and so on. Were there specific--

H: Oh, no. I didn't mean and didn't really say, I don't believe, that his basic decision had been made.

M: That's probably unfair the way I put it.

H: Well, that implies that he had already decided to bomb the North.

M: No, no.

H: I don't think he had. I don't think he decided to bomb the North until late 1964 or early 1965.

M: Really, what I was driving towards is: Were there any events during that period that, in the light of the later events, seem to you to have been critical? In other words, were there decisions made then in that sixty day period or thereabouts that turned out subsequently to have been important?

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H: Well, not in a policy sense. There were several things that happened that made me convinced that my usefulness was at an end and that Johnson's mind had been made up. By that, I meant that he had made up his mind that he wasn't going to accept or negotiate anything less than a victory and that he would do whatever he could. Now, I tried to clear up this confusion in the paper edition of the book.

M: Why, I haven't even seen the paper edition. I read the other great big book twice.

H: In the paper edition, I tried to clear this up. Now the reason it became confused was not, I contend, what I said, but what the New Left said. You see, the New Left review the book and use it, I might say, with complete lack of scholarship, misquoting me, quoting me out of context. Well, you know how they do.

M: Oh, yes.

H: That John McDermott testimony.

M: That's the most famous one, I guess, in the reviews.

H: Yes, that review took quotes from me and I. F. Stone and mixed them all up. And you couldn't tell who was I. F. Stone and who was me.

M: It was quite a juxtaposition, you and I. F. Stone.

H: Yes, I agree. But anyway, I tried to clear this up in a footnote to the paperback edition. I wanted to rewrite the chapter, but the production things that have to be done for photographs--that was all I could do.

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M: Right.

H: Now, let me read this to you. "After the publication of the first edition of this book, it was pointed out to me that the above passage could be misinterpreted to mean that President Johnson had made the decision to escalate the war before the 1964 election campaign, when he so effectively countered Senator Goldwater's advocacy involving the North with the statement that we did not want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. I do not know what occurred after my departure in March, 1964." And I suggest then that James Thomson's article might be helpful to those readers that want to know. "I do know that no such decision had been made by the time that I departed. I also believe that President Johnson sincerely, even desperately, wanted to make the existing policy work. My misgivings were not based on knowledge of any specific decision, but were of a different order. First and probably foremost in my mind was the obvious fact that the advocates of a "political approach" in whom the President had reposed confidence, meaning Kennedy, did not enjoy the confidence of President Johnson. That is, that he did not repose the same confidence in Harriman, Forrestal, and myself." And [George] Ball, I might say. "While those who advocated a more "military" approach, did. Second, there were a number of things, not decisive in themselves, but suggestive. Suggestive, I interpolate, of my growing conviction that he had made up his mind to accept nothing less than a victory."



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M: Right.

H: No matter what the cost, you see. "Not decisive in themselves, but suggestive." His oft repeated remark that this is the only war we've got. That to me was terribly significant. Whereas Kennedy kept saying, "It isn't a war; it's a political struggle with military aspects," you see.

M: But it had become a war, right?

H: It had become a war; "it's the only war we've got."

"His appointment of a committee to prepare a list of possible targets in case the decision to bomb the North became necessary." Now that to me was overwhelming, you see.

M: Was this pressure from the military to go ahead and make this contingency plan that resulted in that?

H: No, it actually went the other way around. Shortly after Kennedy was killed, guys like Rostow started pushing for bombing the North, et cetera. And McNamara was again all gung-ho. McNamara's whole history in this thing was, anytime there's any crisis, starting off with a military type answer, buying whatever the JCS were recommending--coming in and very aggressive and dynamic in an NSC meeting and steamrolling opposition. The other side, Harriman and myself, et cetera, arguing against it. The compromise always was that McNamara would go out to Vietnam, which, of course, I hated too because it kept adding to the American prestige. But then what happened is: Almost every time McNamara would go out gung-ho and come back agreeing with us over and over and over again.

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I used to say that the guy is one of the brightest guys I ever met, but he's not a wise man. His instincts were all wrong, but his intelligence eventually conquered his instincts. But anyway, that's what happened in this case. They went out there.

M: This was the Christmas 1963 visit?

H: That's right. And the issue here was "Boy, we've got to do something about those infiltration routes; we've got to invade Laos, or bomb Laos, or bomb the North. And McNamara goes out and comes back and says, "I do not recommend bombing it at this time. But I do recommend getting ready for it." He's setting up a committee to look over the targets. Well, there was no real battle, in the sense that you can't really fight--

M: A contingency planning.

H: A contingency planning, right. So there was not a battle.

Then he set this up, and the only concession to our side of the thing was they made chairman of the committee, Bill Sullivan, who was, of course, Harriman's protege and a guy in whom we had confidence and in whom McNamara had confidence. He was a bridge type, that is, he was acceptable to both sides. That was the only concession to us, but it seemed to me that this was clear.

M: Was that all that that committee was supposed to do originally? To locate targets?

H: Originally. Then it was later transformed into a Vietnam task force.

M: This was just before you left?

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H: Yes, that's right.

M: What was the background of deciding to do that? Was it important to the problem or something specific?

H: Well, I interpreted it as meaning one more move in disarming the political people, the guys who were advocating the political approach. In other words, one more move in getting us, disarming us, and muting us, spiking our guns. So I interpreted it as a political move to ease us out of positions of influence.

M: That's an important question. George Ball, for example in his book talks about the necessity for continuing the policy pretty much as we are, because of, among other things, the fact that the military people are so in favor of doing so. Can the State Department not stand against that type of pressure--the intensification of the pressure to take a military action?

H: Well, it depends on how the State Department does it. Now, as I think comes out in my book, I felt that, well, let's put it this way: So long as Kennedy lived, we were okay. Except that we ended up making more concessions, i.e. McNamara's continuously visiting Vietnam, which was bad. It elevated the problem; it increased the American commitment publicly and all this. I talked around this in the book, but, in fact on one of those visits of McNamara's, it was decided that he would go, and we had opposed it. I was sufficiently upset that I followed Kennedy into the Oval Office and protested again. With some impatience, as it he were dealing with some unruly child, which he was at the moment, he said, "Look, Roger. I know that. I know that it's costly and

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bad to send McNamara out there. But the only way that we can keep the JCS on board is to keep McNamara on board, and the only way we can keep McNamara on board is to let him go see for himself. Now that's the price we have to pay." Now, I think that Kennedy had to make more concessions than were wise to the military because Rusk did not stand up as much as he should have--as I think he should have.

M: The key then becomes the Secretary of State.

H: That's right. In other words, I think that as I say in the book I can't blame McNamara for pushing his department's view as vigorously as possible. But I certainly can blame Rusk for not pushing his view, or our view. And always over and over again, it ends up with Harriman and Hilsman arguing against McNamara and the JCS and McCone. And that's not quite an equal contest.

M: No, it doesn't sound like it. (Laughter)

H: It would have been much better if it would have been Rusk, Harriman and Hilsman and Forrestal versus McNamara and Joint Chiefs, et cetera. But so long as Kennedy is alive, you see, then we have Bob Kennedy on our side and we have the President on our side.

Now, once Kennedy's dead, with Johnson actually being more sympathetic to the military side, then we are finished. But I think Johnson's mistake again--of course, this goes to his personality--is that he has a hard time having people around who will disagree. He doesn't accept this and, I tell you, I think it's a mistake. I think that the kind of personality like

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Roosevelt's that not only permits, but it delights in opposition all around him--

M: Builds the tensions in, even.

H: Yes, that is a better way for a president. At least you're less likely to make huge mistakes that way. But Johnson has a tendency to build in around him sycophants. He does. Now George Ball attempted to play the role [of dissident], but as James Thomas points out, he ends up being the tame dove.

M: Right, the house dove.

H: The house dove, and then it isn't really serious disagreement, it's . . .

M: Pro forma.

H: Pro forma disagreement. Well, to answer your question, I really think that there's always these oppositions. There are always hawks and doves or hards and softs; there's always this around you as a president. Let's put it this way, Kennedy by and large, on Vietnam, followed the political line and maneuvered around the hard liners, compromised, made concessions, et cetera. Or in, say, Laos, which is an even better example, he followed the softer line and maneuvered around the other ones. Johnson, on Vietnam, followed the hard line and maneuvered around the softs.

M: That's a very well put comparison.

H: Now, the point is if his Vietnam policy had worked he would have come home free, but in fact it turned out that the doves were just as dangerous to Johnson as the hawks were on Laos to Kennedy.

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In the end, the doves brought Johnson down.

M: Right.

H: So the point I'm trying to make is only that both kinds of pressures exist. Now, if you can end the problem and get--let's say Kennedy's great fortune was that, by and large, the Laos agreement, though no raging success, was no failure either. There Souvanna Phouma sits, still prime minister of Laos; it did not go down the drain overnight, or anything like that. And that killed the hard line opposition. They occasionally squeak about it a little bit, but it isn't in the headlines, you see. So it worked, by and large or, at least, it wasn't a success, but it wasn't a failure.

M: It wasn't a failure.

H: And that silences the opposition. In poor Mr. Johnson's case, it didn't work. It got worse, and worse, and worse. And more and more people moved over in opposition.

M: Right, do you answer the other New Left criticisms in the paperback versions of your book? I'm handicapped not having read that edition. The general criticism they make--I think all of them, Howard Zinn and McDermott, and the whole bunch that have reviewed it--was that really the political side that you describe as being a part of it, you and Harriman and Forrestal and the rest, is really just a kind of a sophisticated militarism that leads to the same place. What do they call it, crisis managers?

H: Yes, yes, that stuff. Well, basically, I don't attempt to [answer this criticism]. I have a saying which is: Never wrestle with

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a pig; you both get dirty, and the pig likes it. So I don't ever attempt to deal with these people. They're impossible. Basically that review was not a review of the book. The first third of that McDermott review was an attack on Lyndon Johnson which, using selected quotes from my book, mixing them up with other quotes and also the selected quotes were taken out of context, making me appear to say something I did not say; i.e., they were trying to charge that my book showed that Johnson had decided to bomb the North before the 1964 election. And my book did not say that; quite the opposite.

M: Right.

H: So that was just straight-out lying and propagandizing. The latter two-thirds of the review was an attack on the American social system, but not a review of my book--just using me as an example. And basically it was the same line that Bolsheviks take towards the Social Democrats. If you recall, they said, "Hilsman is a crisis manager and one of the best of his breed." Then it went on to say that you liberals think that Hilsman is a good guy because he fought the generals on Vietnam and all of this stuff. But in fact, he's worse than [General] Curt LeMay. The reason that he is worse than Curt LeMay is that if Hilsman and people like him refused to participate in the American government, it would collapse. Since they participate, they make it work, and therefore they make Curt LeMay possible. Therefore, they are worse than Curt LeMay. You see, it's the Bolshevik reasoning,

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and it's not worthy of a reply.

M: The only other arm of their criticism is, I think, criticism which is always a problem when someone leaves public life. Why, if you disagreed with what was going on, didn't you do something that might have contributed to changing it, or make a public statement?

H: Well, I probably should have answered that one, because, in fact, I'm clean on this. I left office on March 15th and within two weeks I gave a speech. The trouble is that if they had bothered to research it, it would go against their case. I gave a speech in which I warned against the temptation of over-militarizing the war and over-Americanizing the war. Those were my two tag lines that I gave the speech. But I put it in terms of the temptation. What I was saying, of course--and it's perfectly clear in the speech--is that there are people in government who want to bomb the North and want to send American troops, i.e., over-militarize, i.e., over-Americanize. And I warned against this and said it wouldn't work. Now, I gave that speech within two weeks after leaving office. Now, it did not hit the front page of the New York Times. You know, warning against a temptation of something that hasn't happened is not a big headline, and I wasn't that big a public figure. So I think you will find on about page twenty in the New York Times and maybe three or four inches, but it's there. So that charge, in fact, was false.

M: That is one that's worth answering, though, I think.



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H: I think so, but it's too late now.

M: Yes, they wouldn't listen, now, anyway.

H: They're not worth very much, I don't think.

M: The occasion of you leaving brought forward all kinds of different stories about the causes and so on. How do you view it? Did you look upon it as being pushed out, being told to leave?

H: Well, I always regarded this as a kind of red herring, because it really is a chicken-and-egg thing in the sense that technically I resigned, but if I had delayed two or three weeks, Mr. Johnson would have moved me to some other job. I don't think there's any question of that.

M: There's no such thing as firing under a president, really, of somebody at that level, is there?

H: Well, not especially when . . . I mean, you could fire a guy if, like Mr. Fortas, he accepted a bribe or something.

M: Yes, yes, right.

H: But when it's a disagreement over policy, no.

I'll tell you the story as I know it, and I don't know what was going on in the White House or anything else. But in January, I was scheduled to visit Australia. This was six weeks after the President was assassinated. We got on an airplane, and we rode to San Francisco, and that's five hours. Then we spent the night with my parents; then we rode to Honolulu; and that's four and a half hours. I think I went out and spent a morning with CINCPAC. Then it was a Saturday and a Sunday, and we laid on the beach in

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Waikiki. And then we got on an airplane and rode eight hours to Fiji, or something like that. But to make a long story short as we circled Sydney Airport, I said to my wife, "I must resign." And she said, "I thought you had been awfully quiet." Well, I had been quiet and what I had been doing was reviewing in my own mind all of these things, that is, the forming of the bombing committee, the impossibility of little things. You know I think it would have been wise for Johnson, even if he had made up his mind that our side was wrong, at some stage to have called me over and closed the door, just the two of us, and said, "Okay, Roger, I disagree with what you're saying, but I want to give you a chance to make your case without the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs looking over your shoulder. Now tell me what your case is." But he hadn't done that, you see. [There were] things like, "It's the only war we've got," all these little things that I mentioned in the book. I reviewed those, and I came to a conclusion that within a very short time I would either be totally discredited, that is, that there would be a fight, and it would be a nasty thing, and everything I said thereafter would be sour grapes, or more likely, that he would do to me what he did to [John A.] Gronouski or to Ed Martin--that is, that all of a sudden I would be called up one day, and very soon, and told, "Look, I want you to be ambassador to the Philippines."

M: Right.

H: Which is the precedent for it, Chip [Charles E.] Bohlen, you know, in the Eisenhower Administration was sent to the Philippines.

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M: Sure.

H: In other words, not fired, but just shifted or what he did to Harriman, which was to put him on the shelf.

M: Yes, there were other people to whom that ultimately happened.

H: Oh, sure.

M: Other Kennedy people.

H: Sure, that's right. Well, Harriman and . . .

M: Ralph Dungan ended up as ambassador to Chile, I guess.

H: Chile; Gronouski to Poland. Sure. In other words, that, I thought, was what was going to happen. And then I thought very seriously about whether I wanted to do this or not. I've always argued that I did not want to be a career foreign service officer. I think it's a mistake for a presidential appointee to shift over that way. I think it's not fair to the Foreign Service and so on and so forth. I had an academic career and, if I was going to get on with it, I ought to get on with it. And finally, if I was right about the way things were going to go, I wanted to be in the position to be an outside critic. So I came back and went to Harriman and said, "I'm going to resign." Harriman argued with me, and argued with me, and argued with me. Finally he said, "Well, at least go tell Mac Bundy before you do. And give the President a chance to respond before you just do it." And I said, "Averell, if I do that, I will be fired before I can get the resignation typed out."

M: Right.

H: "I would prefer to resign and not do it." Well, Averell said,

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"Well, if anybody tries to do that, they'll have to reckon with me, because I will take the responsibility." Well, in fact, I called Mac up and told him I wanted an appointment, and it was perfectly clear to him what I wanted to talk about. I went out and wrote my resignation out in longhand, and waited for Mac's call. And sure enough this did set things in motion. Before I could see Mac, Ball called me up and I went up to see Ball. Ball said, "We want you to go be ambassador to the Philippines," and I handed him my resignation at the same time.

M: At the same time.

H: Then they did really put considerable pressure on me to go to the Philippines as ambassador.

And of course, this is where Johnson is such a clever guy. You know, he really is one of the brightest men you'll ever meet.

M: Right.

H: As you probably know, his IQ is way up there. But, you see, I had grown up in the Philippines.

M: He knew that, too.

H: And he knew that, too. He'd found that out, and [it was] very much the Gronouski bit, you know.

M: Yes, only Gronouski had never been to Poland, I think.

H: Yes, I know, but a guy of Polish descent to be an ambassador to Poland is a kind of thing.

M: Right.

H: But, you see, I had grown up in the Philippines. It's a number one

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post, it's got a residence up in Baguio and a residence down in Manila. It's a very appealing thing, and it was particularly appealing to me. So that's the way it went, from my point of view. In other words, I would recapitulate and say that there was clearly a policy difference; it was no question that I was going to leave. Whether I left because I wanted to resign or whether I left because I was shifted to Manila seems to me be irrelevant. The point of the matter is that there was a disagreement, and it could not have gone on. And it seems to me to be a storm in a tea cup whether . . .

M: Which came first.

H: Yes, which came first. Because, it was perfectly clear we couldn't go on, that I disagreed so fundamentally with the way they were going that I would not have any utility, that he was so determined, it seemed to me, to go in this direction, that either I would become a prostitute or he would have a guy in the key post that disagreed with the policy to implement it. Now, you couldn't do that. So I had to leave. The only issue was whether I left by going to Manila as ambassador or whether I went outside. And, of course, the fact that I chose to go outside and to be a critic is that much of the tension and bitterness came after all of this, came when I became a public critic.

M: You were talking about the New Left critics or of people who have reviewed you. The right wing said at the time you left--Human Events or somebody--that your telephone had been tapped in the

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State Department and all sorts of things. Is there anything to these allegations at all?

H: I think that's a lot of nonsense. You know, that's just nuts.

M: They generally are, but I give you a chance to deny all the accounts that came out. Was there quite a lot of anti-Johnson talk around town by this time among the Kennedy people? Public talk? Georgetown cocktail circuit talk? This type of thing?

H: Well, I don't know. Of course, there is always this stuff just like there's talk about the Kennedy family and all of this stuff. There's always things like that--the political wits.

But my own feeling about this is that the first few weeks before I went to Australia, and I remember at the time of the funeral, the way Johnson was moving and the importance of him getting hold really touched me. I remember up in the State Department at the time of the reception when we were bringing foreign heads of states in. I was there with a couple of foreign heads of state. As one of them said goodbye, before the next one came up to him, I said to Johnson with tears in my eyes, because it was an emotional time, but I was feeling very identified with the problems he had and everything else, "I just want you to know that"--I think I even said as a Texan or something like that-- "I think you're doing great and I'm with you a hundred per cent." And that was another occasion where it just didn't--[we] sailed by each other, and so on.

I'll tell you frankly, those first few weeks, before I went

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to Australia I kept saying to Mike [Forrestal], "We've got to reach Johnson, that is, we've got to get a chance to sit down and talk to him, really just us, and really tell him what's the background and all of this stuff. We've got to reach him."

And Mike got very pessimistic very quickly. And he was in the White House at first.

M: Sure.

H: He got very pessimistic very quickly. And he said, "You'll never do it." And I said, "Oh, yes, we will." And I began and I called Bill White up and tried to somehow reach the President through Bill White. I tried to think of friends of mine on Capitol Hill, senators, that might do it. It was only when I sat down on that airplane and reviewed it that I realized how hopeless it was, that I began to be convinced that there was just no longer any point.

M: Where is Mike Forrestal? He's one of the people we can't locate.

H: He's here in town. Shearman and Sterling.

M: He's with Shearman and Sterling.

H: Yes, right here in town.

M: Okay, good. We had to get our addresses through the White House, and they've lost track of him somehow.

H: Well, it's 20 Exchange Place in New York City. Shearman, S-H-E-A-R M-A-N and Sterling, P. O. 98500.

M: Okay.

H: I see him all the time.

M: Good, because we do really want to talk to him.

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H: No, I'll tell you, my own feeling is that my departure was directly concerned with Vietnam, absolutely centered upon Vietnam. And of course, I suppose--you know, I never was one of the jet set or this business. My father was an army officer and I'm not in this eastern seaboard--

M: Establishment?

H: No, I certainly am not. I'm not of the Mac Bundy group and so on and so forth. So there was never any of that, as far as I was concerned at least, in my relations to Johnson.

It was strictly policy as far as I was concerned. And I think that the restatement of it is that it became very clear that his viewing of it and mine were diametrically opposed. It was perfectly obvious that I couldn't stay from his point of view and from my point of view. I couldn't stay and try to carry out a policy that I didn't agree with, and he couldn't have a man in a key position who disagreed with the policy he wanted followed. So it was perfectly clear I had to go. And I think these issues of personal attention and all this stuff are pretty much afterwards, that is, the gossip sort of thing afterwards that come up. I remember somebody came up to me a year or so later, and again, that's always the key. It's after the public quarrel begins, and this really begins in September of 1965 when I testified before Ted Kennedy's Subcommittee on Refugees, which was probably unfortunate that it was a Kennedy subcommittee.

M: Yes.



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H: But nevertheless, that was the only opportunity I had. But when I came out and said, "The bombing is a mistake; it should have never been done," that was September of 1965. It had been going on for nine months. I kept quiet after the bombing started. And I think all the tension and bitterness stems from after the point, you see. For example, it was after that that somebody had told me some story about my having a tiff with Lady Bird at a party. That's absolutely absurd. I have never been to a party with Lady Bird except the Bill White party. So, you know, you get all this crap, which seems to me to be crap.

M: What kind of things did Mr. Johnson and his White House people do to a critic such as yourself? You've mentioned a couple of stories that he gave to the press. Were there other things, other reactions that came back to you after you became an open critic and particularly after the book came out?

H: Well, as far as Johnson is concerned, the only thing that has ever come back to me was this sort of thing that you've heard about on background with the press. I mean, I've heard stories of what he said about Mac Bundy, about Bill Moyers in backgrounders and so on and so forth which I dismiss. There have been two or three episodes that friends of mine in the press have said that he said. One was this story I've already told you.

M: Right, right.

H: Which I have no doubt he said. I don't think he was fabricating it. I think he was mixing up disagreement and so on and so forth.

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M: By the time he told it, he believed it.

H: Yes, by the time he told it, he believed it. But there have been a couple of things like that and things like his just making disparaging remarks of "Certainly glad we got rid of Hilsman," or things like that.

M: Nothing concrete in the way of retribution.

H: No, nothing that I know of. My income tax has been audited every year, but I don't think that has anything to do with it. (Laughter)

M: That can happen to anybody.

H: Mr. Rusk, I think, is not as big a man as Mr. Johnson and he has said some things. I remember it was reported in the press that in a background session with the Washington Post-New York Times people that he has said that he fired me. And my response to that publicly and privately is that I doubt very much if he said it that way. Because, first of all, it isn't true. And second of all, I would think he was a bigger man than that. But I do think that Rusk is probably--well, for example, I wrote Rusk a letter very similar to that letter, and he did not answer, but Mr. Johnson did, as you see.

M: That's a significant difference, I think.

H: I think it's a significant difference. Of course Rusk's view of government is such a peculiar one--that of secrecy, excessive secrecy. I really think that Rusk feels that the American people don't have a right to know what goes on in their government and that he really thinks that anybody who writes a book is making

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a mistake.

M: Although presumably he's preparing something for publication of his own right now.

H: Probably his speeches. (Laughter)

M: Right.

H: But you know, most of the reviewers who didn't have an ideological ax to grind, i.e., the ones that were neither on the right nor the left thought that I really kind of leaned over backwards to be fair to Rusk, and I certainly didn't have anything in it like Schlesinger did about being a Buddha or something like that. I actually have a lot of admiration for Rusk, but I make no bones of the fact that I think that he did not serve Kennedy well, in the sense that he did not present the case for the political side vigorously, that he tended to sit there, you know.

M: The only other issue in which you mention Johnson in the book is in regard to Indonesia. Did he ever give an explanation to you as to his refusal to sign the determination required by the Broomfield amendment?

H: Yes, I must confess that . . . It's funny about that. There were really three substantive issues, you know, at the time that we overlapped--the hundred days or whatever it was.

M: The hundred days.

H: The hundred days. One of them was China policy, and this is very--

M: Was something moving there at that time?

H: Oh, you bet you; you bet your boots. See, what had happened was

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this was my open door speech and this is very interesting. I hope this gets into the record. Just to review the bidding, Kennedy had tried to do something about China policy in 1961 . . .

M: Right.

H: . . . by recognizing them and by going on with the rest of it. And just came a cropper on Capitol Hill. So that ended that. Then one thing led to another, you know. In 1962 there was the crisis over Quemoy-Matsu and the buildup and so on. Then in 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis. Then there was--it's in the book--the "year of the tiger" business where Chiang kept trying to land people on the mainland, guerrillas and so on. But the fall of 1963 came around, and we looked around the world, and things looked pretty good. The Cuban Missile Crisis has passed; Test Ban Treaty is signed; things are quiet; you know, pretty good. And the time had come to do something about China, and this was kind of decided. The opportunity came with an invitation to me to give a speech in San Francisco. So we really prepared a very careful speech. And this was to be sort of the policy of the second Kennedy Administration, you know, that we were going to get it going before the election. And the key phrase in that speech, just to try to prove the point that it was a fundamental change, was that Dulles's speech said that Communism on the mainland is a passing phase . . .

M: Right.

H: . . . and out of that assumption flows a policy of hostility, rigidity, isolating China. Well, in my speech the key phrase

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is: here there's been all this turmoil, but there is no evidence that the communist regime is in any danger, that is, it's here to stay. And that out of that flows what is called the open door speech--"we will match you step by step."

Now, Kennedy was killed before I gave the speech, and then the question was: Do I give it anyway. I sounded out the White House on this one, and [there was] no objection. So I decided to take the bull by the horns and go ahead and do it. I suppose in my mind [I said], "We might as well smoke out Johnson on this one," because this was very early in the first couple of weeks. But I took the speech up to Rusk, told him what was in it, and said, "Do you want to read it? There's going to be some flap about it." And when he said, "No, I'll let you do your own thing," I gave the speech, and there were big headlines and everything else. Interestingly enough, [there was] very little kickback from Capitol Hill. The China lobby eventually did attack the speech, but was very slow about it. But nothing much from Capitol Hill. [There was] some favorable editorial comment around the country, very good, even in anti-State Department papers. And generally the way it goes was, you know, they're common sense people. Here we've been doing this for so many years, and it hadn't worked. Well, let's try something different. So the old sting of the China lobby was out.

Well, after a couple of weeks to see what the flak was, I called up Walter Jenkins and Tom Hughes. Tom had known him; I

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didn't know him; but Tom Hughes called up Walter Jenkins and said Roger Hilsman would like to have lunch with you and like to find out how the President felt. Now that already gives you a measure of this. I couldn't call the White House and say, "Can I see the President? I want to talk to him about this China speech." I had to go through devious ways, you know. But anyway, Walter Jenkins was warned that we really wanted to see what LBJ felt. We also wanted to talk about the upcoming election. Because Tom and I, both being political animals, were thinking about what the White House had in mind and how we might give speeches and so forth for the 1964 election. But, anyway, we asked Walter Jenkins to sound the President out on it. He came back and said, "On the whole, very good. The President thought this was pretty good." And that was encouraging.

Now I did not--I would never have recommended implementing the speech. If Kennedy had been alive, I had on my desk recommendations to lift travel bans on Americans, reexamine the question of trade restrictions, invite them to the disarmament talks, and recognize Mongolia. Those would have been the first moves. But I never even forwarded those to the White House, because you see, my feeling would be that you don't want any grand initiatives in foreign policy in the period when the new President has got to get his hands on the reins. The time to do that would have been after the 1964 election, you see. So I was happy.

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It even went so far that it was either the summer of 1965 or the summer of 1966, but I think the summer of 1965, before my public attack on the bombing, I got a call from the White House staff, and then President Johnson had made a speech on China policy that was very similar in content to mine. You know, it was an olive branch. The White House staff called me and said, "Well, we thought somebody from the White House ought to call you today, because the President has made a speech that carries out your ideas." Further, some of them said, "Why, we even just pulled the press briefing for your speech out of the file and used it over again." My point being that there was no disagreement about this that I am aware of, that he was sympathetic to my views on China policy.

The other two issues were Vietnam and Indonesia. I think, and I thought at the time and I think today, that his handling of Indonesia was bad. And again, it was the same thing; it was listening to military side.

M: It was the military and not Congress in this case?

H: Well, all right, it was Congress. You are probably right. You're probably right.

M: I was kind of driving at the idea of whether or not he leaned on Congress pretty hard there at the first.

H: Yes, that's right. You're probably right. But anyway, I thought it was a mistake. He sided too heavily with the British. Of course, it was linked to Vietnam. He wanted British support on Vietnam, you see. And the truth of the matter is that this one he lucked out on.

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M: Like you said: If you win, your opponents are disarmed.

H: That's right, but I would say that the truth of the matter is that he lucked out, not because of anything he did or the Americans did. What happened here was that the other side made a mistake. And I think that truth of the matter is that not only did our policy not contribute to the victory in the coup of 1965, but actually hurt our friends--our policy did. [It] weakened our side. And I think that if the Communists hadn't made the mistake of attempting a coupe prematurely and [had] let it go and gained strength, which . . . Our policy was really weakening our friends and strengthening the Communists, I think. So I disagreed with Mr. Johnson on this one. And here again, you know, he put the responsibility in the hands of McNamara, and that's not where it belonged. It was bad, and that was another element, another element in my feeling that he was just not going to listen to the Harriman-Forrestal-Hilsman-Ball group.

M: I don't want to cut you off. You're very generous with your time. Are there any other subjects on which you had dealings or knowledge of Mr. Johnson that you think should be mentioned here?

H: No. There's one funny story. And that is that once in here, I have forgotten the exact date, but by this time I think that the policy disagreements were clear. But I took over to the White House--it must have been--[Harold] Holt, the later prime minister. He wasn't a prime minister at the time. But I think it was that; it was an Australian. And as assistant secretary, I took him over to see Johnson--just the three of us. And in the kind of the banter



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that takes place in the beginning, Holt, I'm sure it was, said something about having just been to Texas. And Mr. Johnson said, "Well, that is more than Roger can say." And I got my back up, you know, because he had forgotten that I was a Texan. As I recall the episode, it was a little flip, fresh, but I said something about, "Mr. Johnson, you've forgotten I'm a Texan. Why, I have two of my relatives portraits hanging in the state house of Austin." And I didn't say, but you know the thought, "which is more than you could say." (Laughter)

M: Right, right.

H: But I didn't say it.

M: You saw him in some very trying times there at the beginning, but you did see him fairly close. What kind of personal diplomat was he during those three months?

H: Dealing with foreigners?

M: Right.

H: Oh, I think very good.

M: Some of these critics have traced a lot of our later trouble with De Gaulle, for example, to the funeral meeting and so on.

H: Well, I was not present there. I was not present there. But this guy is a highly intelligent person, and he's canny, and when he wants to be, he can be charming and sensitive; there's no question of that. He can be awfully cruel when he wants to be to people, and there's a streak of this in him, too.

One thing I do remember and notice now that I think about

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it. I hadn't thought of this, but it's true of everybody and it probably doesn't have too much significance. When I first became assistant secretary and had to deal with foreign ambassadors, you're not quite sure of yourself at first. I can remember my looking past the ambassador, finishing something that it had been decided that I would say, and looking over to the desk officer for reassurance, you know. And I noticed that Johnson did this with me. That the first two or three chiefs of state that I brought in, he would make his pitch, and then he would look at me for reassurance..

M: So it works all up and down the line, right?

H: Sure it does. I noticed that, but I wouldn't put too much significance on it in the sense that some people might say that this is another instance of his real insecurities [of] which, of course, he has many.

M: Yes.

H: But I don't think so, because I think this is a natural thing that happens to anybody who is thrown into that kind of situation where you suddenly have to play a new role.

Well, I don't know. You have nothing else?

M: No, I don't want to keep you from delving into areas that you think are important. But you've been very generous with your time. And if you can't think of anything to add now, perhaps you can add it to the transcript or something.

H: Well, he is an extraordinary personality. You know, he's a big

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man, in the sense that his successes are big and his failures are big.

M: That's true. You might add, incidentally, what we were talking about before the recording started, that the breach between you and Mr. Johnson has, at least apparently according to the documents on your wall, been now healed by an exchange of very friendly letters in January and March of 1969.

H: That's right, but I don't know that it would be wise to say that the breach has healed. I think that people like Walt Rostow who are going to be very busy--

M: Are very busy.

H: [They] are very busy trying to justify the decisions and rationalize them, that that's not going to heal, in that sense. And in the sense that I think that some major mistakes were made. And I think that some of them were unnecessary mistakes. I think some of them go back to Johnson's personality, in that his inability to tolerate opposition around him . . .

M: The sycophancy that you mentioned earlier.

H: Well, that's where his insecurity comes in. I always used to say after I got to know him fairly well, after this period that there were only two possible relations with Johnson. One was the Jack Valenti relationship; you know, a total adulation. And the other one was that you had to be a senator. Now, what I meant by that was that you had to have independent political power. Then you could have a relationship with Johnson. But where it's perfectly

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true that where, with Kennedy, see, I had nothing except expertise. I mean, I had no constituency; I couldn't go out and muster opposition. I'm in a better position to now than I was then.

M: Right.

H: You see, because I've gotten to be known because of the criticizing of the Vietnam War. But [then] I had no constituency. Yet with Kennedy, I could feel as free to stand up and argue with the Joint Chiefs of Staffs as the next man, you see. But not so with Johnson; not so with Johnson. It just seemed to be very difficult to have a relationship with him, unless you either had independent power or were willing to be a Jack Valenti.

M: That's an important distinction.

H: Yes.

M: Well, thank you very much again. Sooner or later we'll get a transcript of this back to you.

H: Okay.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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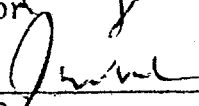
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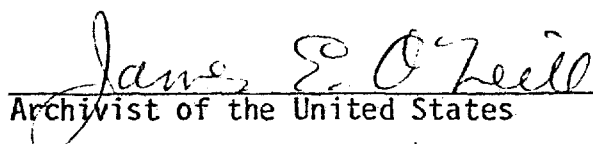
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