INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 22, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM J. JORDEN

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Jorden's office in the Federal Building, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's begin by identifying you, sir. You are William J. Jorden, and your last public service was on the national security staff of Mr. Rostow. Prior to that you had been deputy assistant secretary of state for public affairs from 1965 until 1966. Prior to that you had been special assistant to Mr. [Averell] Harriman. Prior to that you had been on the Policy Planning Council. Prior to that you had been a New York Times State Department reporter. Does that pretty well get the last ten or fifteen years?

J: It does except my last public service was as a member of the American delegation to the peace talks in Paris.

M: You didn't go there as a member of the national security staff?

J: No. I went as a delegate, as an adviser to Ambassadors Harriman and Vance, and as spokesman for the delegation. So I was really still on the White House payroll but technically attached to the Department of State.

M: Did you have any contact with Mr. Johnson personally prior to the time he was president, in your journalism days?

J: Before he was president?

M: Before he was vice president even. The fifties or before.

J: No, I don't think so. I did have some contact with him before I got

into government when he was vice president, because as a reporter I was covering foreign affairs. I remember once I came down to the Ranch to cover the visit of Chancellor Adenauer when Mr. Johnson was vice president. But I didn't have any contact with him in the fifties when he was in the Senate because I was working the other part of town, the diplomatic beat.

M: Right. Then you joined the State Department during the year 1961 shortly after he became vice president, and were on the Policy Planning Council.

J: Yes, in August, 1961.

M: And you were in that position when you went to Vietnam for the first time. Is that correct, about 1961?

J: Yes.

M: Mr. Johnson also made a trip to Vietnam in 1961. Did you ever have occasion to talk to him about his trip there?

J: No, I didn't. I never had a chance to talk to him about that trip. I have read about it, of course, and read reports on it. But I haven't discussed it with him.

M: You went with the Taylor and Rostow mission, didn't you?

J: Yes, I did, but that wasn't my first trip. I went the first time alone.

M: But after you had joined the State Department?

J: Yes, immediately after. It was my first job in government as a matter of fact. Shortly, I think within a week after I went in I was asked to go out to Vietnam and to take a look and to write a report on what was happening. Basically it turned out to be a report on North Vietnamese

aggression and their activities in South Vietnam at that time. So I went out that first time alone and then went out the second time with the Taylor-Rostow mission, which was a couple of months later.

M: And you concluded on those trips that the evidence of North Vietnamese activity was fairly clear-cut.

J: Oh, it was very clear, very clear, yes. I wrote as a result of these two long visits and all the research that I did the State Department paper called "A Threat to the Peace," which was a report on developments in Vietnam and North Vietnam's direction of the insurgency.

M: Was that your first contact with Mr. Rostow, the Taylor-Rostow mission?

J: No. I met Walt the first time about three days after I came into the government. He was in the White House at that point, working with Mac Bundy, and he called me over a few days after I joined the government just to talk. So that was the first time I met him.

M: Turned out to be a rather close association, didn't it, as time went by?

J: Very.

M: Quite obviously. The reason I'm delving on this early period is that you were in a good position to have an impression at least of what the nature of the American commitment in Vietnam was during the latter two years of President Kennedy's tenure and, thus, to estimate about what it was at the time Mr. Johnson became president. Would you say that the commitment came during that period, the genuine commitment to stay there?

J: Did it come under Kennedy?

M: Kennedy.

J: Oh, yes, very much so. I think that President Kennedy made his basic decision in the fall of 1961. As a result of the Taylor-Rostow mission and the very, very long report which we did, he then decided to increase American assistance, to put in increased air power and to train the Vietnamese more--send in advisers, et cetera, et cetera. I think that if you study the record of Kennedy's statements from 1961 through 1962 and 1963, it's quite clear that the commitment was made and that he was going to abide by it. During those years of course the American involvement did increase. Based on his very clear statements, and certainly the impression that all of us got who were working on the problem, he had made up his mind that we were not going to see Vietnam taken over by the North.

M: Some of his friends and associates who have since changed their minds have speculated in print that he would not have followed the course that President Johnson subsequently was forced to follow. Do you think that is probably a misreading of--

J: One could speculate endlessly about what would have happened if the decisions had been made by somebody else. My own personal feeling is that the American commitment probably would have followed about this same general course under Kennedy as it has followed under President Johnson. I don't think there would have been any major difference.

M: Do you recall there being important people who strongly opposed continuing the commitment at the time Mr. Johnson first became president?

J: No, I don't. I didn't know anybody in the State Department who did. That is, anyone who was directly connected with the problem. Dean Rusk,

and George Ball--I think all of them felt at that time that the commitment was right, and so I think that as time went along some of them began to waver and wonder and so on. I think George Ball is a good example. I think that later on in the 1965 period he had a lot of reservations about the commitment and the extent of it. There were some people who did not, I think, favor bombing North Vietnam. There were others who later, after the bombing had been going on for a while, were in favor of either stopping it or cutting it back.

M: These were tactical objections rather than concessions.

J: Exactly, that's what I was going to say. It was a matter of degree and how much you did this and how much you did that, not whether the basic elements of policy should be carried out.

M: At the time Mr. Johnson was suddenly propelled into the presidency, the point as I take it to what you're saying is--and don't let me lead you anywhere that you don't want to go--to have reversed what was going on at that point would have been to go against pretty well unanimous advice.

J: Oh, yes, quite clearly. I can think of no one in a position of responsibility, any of the people who were close advisers to the President, who were inclined to advise him to change the commitment or to have a reversal of policy.

M: Did the commitment change in any way then in the subsequent period, say the 1964-65 period? Did the goals or commitment change in any way, or was it just a continuation?

J: I don't think the goals have ever changed. I think that if you go back to the early statements of President Johnson, go back to the statements

of Kennedy, it seems to me the basic goals have never changed. That is, that South Vietnam should have the right to determine its own political and economic institutions and its own form of government; and that the unification of the country should be a matter of the freely expressed will of the Vietnamese people, North and South; and that the effort to take over the country and to bring it under the control of the government in Hanoi should not succeed. I don't think the basic objective has ever changed since, indeed, since Eisenhower. You know, Eisenhower made some very strong statements about Vietnam in 1954. The whole military advisory effort was carried out under the Eisenhower Administration, and the very extensive aid program began under Eisenhower. So, I would say that from that time on, from Geneva in 1954-55, until today, the basic goal of American policy hasn't changed.

Now, obviously, in 1964-65 there were new elements because I think the nature of the war changed during that period and two important decisions were made in 1965. One was to carry the war to the North in the form of aerial attack and the second was to commit organized units of American forces to combat.

M: Were you closely involved with the presidential decision-making in either or both of those cases?

J. I was still in the State Department during that time, but in early 1965 I did go out to Vietnam again. I guess I've been to Vietnam ten times in the last seven years. I went out in early 1965, again to look at the total situation as best I could, to get all of the intelligence data

that was available, to talk to captured prisoners, to read hundreds and hundreds of interrogation reports, and so on--and to see whether the earlier report I had done in 1961 was still valid, whether that basic situation had changed in any way. What I found on the basis of the most thorough research I could carry out was that, indeed, the involvement of North Vietnam was even clearer then than it had been and that their direct involvement in the form of personnel, et cetera, et cetera, in the South had deepened, and that they were committed to carrying on the war at a higher level, more intensively and with more force, with new equipment brought in from China and the Soviet Union and increasing numbers of native North Vietnamese troops trained in the North Vietnamese army and so on.

M: That point there is one that the critics have made quite a lot of. If you were there at that time you have a particularly good idea of what the accuracy of varying reports as to when the first identifiable regular DVN units were in the South. You know, there were originally reports in late 1964, and some of the critics would say there weren't any there until after we began the bombing in February 1965.

J: I was there at the time and I interviewed North Vietnamese soldiers who had come down from North Vietnam in units at the end of 1964.

M: So you have direct knowledge of units there prior to the beginning of the--

J: Oh, yes, no question about it, no question about it. I think that the process began, oh, about August or September--that is, the movement

in North Vietnam. Those units which were at the beginning elements of the 325th division began coming in-country into South Vietnam around November or early December of 1964. And by February, March of 1965 the numbers were significant.

M: We had actually captured--

J: Captured, yes.

M: Did you work on the white paper of early 1965? Was this the aggression from the North?

J: That's right, I wrote it.

M: You wrote it. You worked on it indeed then. That has been another point at which some of the critics have fastened--on the claim that it said a lot and proved too little, and that it just didn't do an overwhelming case for aggression from the North.

J: I think most of the people who have criticized it were generally, as far as I know, people who had already made up their minds about Vietnam and who would be inclined to look for any loopholes, or anything that was less than overwhelming.

I think that what you have to remember is that a report like that, which is written for public consumption, can't be eight hundred pages with fifty-seven footnotes in each chapter.

M: If it is, it won't be for public information.

J: Otherwise, nobody's going to read it, and it's not going to get circulation. It's not going to give people the chance to have at least the basic elements that are present. So I had to draw a balance between just a short ten-page report that stated certain facts, or an eight

hundred-page report that stated all of the facts as we knew them, which would never be read except by the specialists. So I ended up going down the middle of the road and I guess the report is about fifty or seventy-five pages, something like that, in which I just used some evidence for each of the points I was trying to make. I could have thrown, you know, everything but the kitchen sink into it and that still wouldn't have convinced the people who tended to criticize the report, because I didn't throw everything in.

M: Did you have any contact with the White House in the preparation of that report, any instruction or guidance?

J: No. Walt and others who were dealing with foreign affairs problems, and particularly with the Far East, knew that I was doing it. And when I got back and started writing and finished the draft I sent copies over so that they would see what I was doing. But I wasn't working for the White House at that time, and I wasn't operating under their guidance. I was simply instructed to go out and do the best job I could in terms of assembling evidence and seeing what the situation was and reporting on it.

M: Then it was right after that that you were appointed deputy assistant secretary? Or right about that time, I guess.

J: Just about that time, yes. I think I went out to Vietnam in February or March, and I think I was made deputy assistant secretary in May.

M: Right. In that position, where you were dealing with the press--this, of course, is before Mr. Johnson's, I guess, really bad trouble with the press began, so you had a chance to see some of that develop through

1965. Can you give an estimate as to why so much difficulty was encountered with the press over Vietnam and the Dominican Republic and other foreign policy issues?

J: Oh, it's a little hard to sort out. I think that probably any president who had been involved in a problem as difficult and as complex and as trying as Vietnam, or the Dominican Republic, some of the other crises that came along, would have had a good deal of trouble. I think any president facing a crisis is automatically subjected to a great deal of criticism. Generally, the critics are more vocal than the supporters, so I would just say that part of it is just in the nature of things.

Historically, I think if you look back at the presidencies of the last hundred years you find that every time there was really something that bothered the country that was trying and difficult, the president was subjected to very severe criticism. This is sometimes forgotten in the wash of history, but in 1864 it was very unlikely that Abraham Lincoln would have been elected president until the fall of Atlanta.

M: He didn't think he would be!

J: He didn't think he would be. He was being just hounded unmercifully by the press, by politicians, by members of his own party who didn't want him to run and so on and so on. Wilson went through hell when he was trying to establish a sensible world order after World War I. Roosevelt went through severe criticism. Harry Truman was going to be impeached, and Jack Kennedy, in the final months of his administration, was in very severe trouble with the press, which people forget in the wake of what has happened.

M: And earlier in the Bay of Pigs thing, the President had a very hard time.

J: Well, the Bay of Pigs really was an awful way to start an administration. But he was severely criticized and by late 1963 his popularity around the country was way down. So any president who had to deal with problems as tough as Vietnam would have been subjected to criticism.

I think that one of the sources of greatest difficulty in this case was the Senate. I think you can pick out about ten men in the Senate who caused great difficulty by their criticism, by their repeated attacks. Now, that's what a senator is supposed to do, presumably, if he really believes that the country's making a mistake, or the policy's wrong, or whatever, it's up to him to point them out. I do believe that there was a hell of a lot of unreasonable and poorly based criticism of the President coming from a few men--from Senator Fulbright and Gore, Senator Young from my old state of Ohio. You could pick out eight or ten who were really the focus of perhaps 50 per cent of the criticism.

M: Is this where the critics got their ammunition, mainly from Capitol Hill rather than some place in the executive branch?

J: Oh, I think there was much more from the Congress than from the executive branch.

M: To your knowledge, was there a critical center anywhere in the executive branch where these people were fed critical information periodically or regularly?

J: Not to my knowledge. I've often suspected that there were a few

individuals who were doing that, but I have no evidence of it that I could point to and support in a court of law, so I would just as soon not talk about it. There were a few areas of opposition and criticism--a few individuals in State and a few in the Defense Department, among some civilians in the Defense Department, as opposed to military.

M: Was this in the International Affairs office primarily?

J: Primarily.

M: Do you think there was anything particularly inept about the way this administration dealt with the press critics as compared to earlier administrations?

J: That's what I'm going to say. You know, I do believe, first, that a good deal of this is inevitable; second, that a few individuals in the Congress, particularly in the Senate, made life a great deal more difficult by carping criticism and by not coming up with constructive suggestions about what should be done, what they would stand by. They just said that the President was wrong and we were going too far, and we ought to find some way out and so on.

I don't believe finally that President Johnson did as good a job handling the press as he could have. But here again one doesn't know know what he could have done. God knows he worked at it, he spent a great deal of time with individual reporters, talking to them, trying to be as candid as he could, and so on. I think that as far as those reporters who really knew him well and who saw him often are concerned, he got pretty fair treatment. The worst criticisms and the sniping and so on came from reporters by and large who didn't really know him well,

didn't see him too much.

M: Could this have been some of their reason, the fact that they thought maybe he was playing favorites with others than themselves?

J: It could be, it could be. I think that probably if the President had seen more of certain individuals in the press it would have helped him. Also I think his nature--his personality, his temperament--is such that he is just much better with a few people in an informal setting than he is in a public setting with a huge press conference and television lights glaring and so on and so on. I just don't think that he handles that kind of setting as well as Jack Kennedy did.

But I think that there is no man who has ever been in the presidency who handles a small group better than President Johnson. I mean his sincerity and his informality and all of these characteristics come out when he's just in a relaxed mood and where he can just sit back and tell people what he thinks and what he's up against, what the problem is, what he's trying to do, et cetera, et cetera. That comes across. If there had been some way to transfer that technique and that facility into the public domain it probably would have helped tremendously.

I was always in favor, for example, of instead of having big press conferences, to just sit in a room like this and have maybe six or eight reporters who were smart and who would ask all the questions that six hundred would ask and therefore cover the ground, but just in an informal way, with maybe just one camera off in the corner where it wasn't intruding into the proceedings. If he could have done that every ten days, over a period of time I think that his personality and his character

would have come across to the American people in a way that I think they never have.

M: Do you think that's the origin of the credibility gap, so-called, the lack of communication as distinct from lack of information being put out, or false information being put out, and so on?

J: The credibility gap--I don't know that anybody could really explain it. I think that in part it was a failure to get out information on a regular basis; I think that very often in White House news conferences the answers to questions were "no comment" rather than being more forthcoming. Now often there were very good reasons for not having a comment on a particular question because it involved something that was terribly sensitive at the time and that could have been affected by public disclosure and so on and so on. But I think that just as a generalization that I would say that it would have been better to put out more information on a more regular basis and to use the White House and State Department daily press briefings more effectively.

But I think another very important element in the credibility gap is the difference between a lot of the reporting out of Saigon and the description of the situation in Vietnam by officials in Saigon and by officials in Washington. And I think that both can be faulted. I think there were often too many optimistic predictions made that a year later looked rather sick. I think that there should have been a lot more official skepticism from the outset. I think that everybody should have been reminded constantly of the complexity of this war, of all of the elements that are involved. It was certainly clear to me that it was

going to be long and tough and painful. There were no easy answers, no quick solutions. So then I think that general approach would have been much better if it had been adopted early in the game and if we had stuck with it--rather than, you know, people going out and saying it looks a lot better than it did six months ago, things are moving, troops will be home by Christmas, et cetera, et cetera. That didn't help.

At the other end of the spectrum, of course, I think that, first, the Vietnam story has been the most important news development of the last decade. And it has been widely reported and badly reported.

M: You are anticipating my questions. That's one I wanted you to talk about, the degree of competence of the people out there. You've been there so many times.

J: Of course, I've covered wars myself. I have had a good chance, first of all,to know the Vietnam situation and, second, to know the press corps in Saigon. While there have been some superb reporters who have done a serious, conscientious and thorough job, by and large the press corps in Saigon over the years, has been made up of men with too little experience--bright, intelligent, energetic, but without a great deal of experience in either foreign affairs or politics. [If] you take a young twenty-six year old reporter who has had maybe two years' experience and has covered the local courthouse and throw him into a Vietnam, you're going to get a lot of superficial, inaccurate and emotional reporting. When young men go out and see somebody killed for the first time, so on and so on, or who have developed fancy political theories and see suddenly a very complicated Asian society

trying to develop its political life you can get a lot of nonsense written, and you did have a lot of nonsense written, and a lot of emotional writing in which the reporters injected themselves into the situation. And after six months they were not prepared to just report and tell the American people what was happening, but to tell them what should be happening--and to advise the government, and advise the President and so on with all of their own private theories about the way this kind of thing should be handled. That strain just was evident in so much of the reporting that came out of Saigon.

I don't blame the reporters as much as I blame editors because, first of all, in covering this kind of situation it seems to me that editors and publishers have an obligation to pick good men--to pick their best men, not their youngest men, not just the guy who's able to stand the gaff physically, who wants adventure, but somebody who's going to do a serious job of conveying to the American people what's happening.

Second, beyond the selection of people is the matter of editing itself. I've seen hundreds of stories in American newspapers which, if I had been an editor, I would have given back to the man who wrote it and said, "Why do you say this? What's the basis for this?" Or, "You're putting too much of yourself into this story, let's just tell it as it is," and so on. A kind of constructive editing which has gone out of fashion in the American newspaper business. All people are interested in is whether there are six hundred words or eight hundred words or whether it's going to be on page one or page seventeen--that's

editing. Well, it's not editing in my book!

M: If you were advising, as you will be here, the historians of the future, whose dispatches would you advise them to read? Any specific ones that stand out as being particularly competent over the long period?

J: Well, I would say that the best reporting of the Vietnam situation has been by guys like Bob Shaplen of the New Yorker; Sol Sanders, U.S. News and World Report; Keyes Beech of the Chicago Daily News--

M: You did get one newspaper in there. I was going to say, as an old newspaperman you were tending to favor the magazine people here.

J: Perhaps. That's because it is a tough story and it is complicated and a magazine writer has a little more time to work up his piece, to gather his evidence, to cover the bases, to double check--if he's just writing once a week. The reporters having to write every day are much more under the gun--to say nothing of the news agency men who have to write every hour. I mean they have to write everything that happens as it happens, so you get a great deal of inaccurate reporting in the wire services simply because of the pressure of time. Yet their stories are more likely to reach more people than any others, because the wire services go to thousands of newspapers and every radio station in the country, and so on. When you get one inaccurate wild report coming in it will be heard by perhaps fifty million people before it can be corrected.

M: And how many people read the New Yorker at the same time!

J: Exactly! Any magazine. As soon as you get into that kind of reporting your audience is limited. But you asked me where would somebody trying to look back at this period and looking for serious and solid reporting--

M: I think it's important to get that down because they have all kinds of choices to look at.

J: That's right.

M: You were there at the time so you know who was doing a good job.

J: I know enough about this business of research and the historical process to know that most historians are going to go to the New York Times because of availability and the complete index, and so on. It's an easier research tool, but some of the worst reporting out of Vietnam is to be found in the columns of the New York Times, my old alma mater.

But there's a lot of good reporting, too. The difficulty, I think, will be to try to sort out the good from the bad. I think that there were periods when there was a lot of good reporting in the Times and there were other periods when it was just so emotional and impassioned and where I think young reporters tended to unconsciously make their news reports fit the editorial opinion of the paper, which was critical of our policy in Vietnam.

M: Does this apply with any particular nature to Halberstam? Isn't he the one who won the Pulitzer Prize?

J: Halberstam won the Pulitzer Prize, yes. Well, Halberstam--I know Dave very well. He and I worked in the same office for a time. I knew him in Saigon. I read his reporting. Sometimes it is absolutely superb, and sometimes it was very emotional. He did get into the story himself. But I think, for example, that in the 1963 period, when he was doing a lot of his best reporting, although it was highly colored, it was conveying to the American people a better sense of the crisis in Vietnam

than a lot of the things that were being said officially.

I was in Vietnam in February, 1963, March, came back in March. In my report I said that there were really serious problems in that society, that the pressures were building up tremendously and I would be very doubtful that Ngo Dinh Diem could survive that year.

M: In other words, that was the point when the reportorial reports were a little bit more exact perhaps than the official optimism that was being voiced by some?

J: As I say, I was talking about February-March before it really boiled up, but if you look at the reporting for that summer, July-August and so on, you get a sense of crisis and of deep problems and tension in the society and growing opposition to the government, et cetera, et cetera, which came out much better in the reporting than it did in official statements.

M: Now you moved over to the Rostow shop in 1966, in May or June.

J: That's right, May.

M: Did you continue to have as part of your bailiwick, in that staff, relations with the press?

J: Yes, to a certain extent although my basic responsibility on the NSC staff was Asia. So I had to be responsible for anything that concerned the whole area from Korea and Japan to and through Burma. So that basically I was following those countries, I was reporting to Mr. Rostow and to the President on what was happening, arranging state visits, all that kind of thing. But in addition I was paying very close attention to Vietnam and, as part of my responsibilities, I was either dealing with the press or advising on dealing with the press.

M: What is the relation, if it can be explained in anything less than a great volume, between the country specialists in the national security staff--Asia man in your case, Middle East, Africa or whatever--and the comparable geographic bureau in the State Department?

J: What's the--?

M: The relationship.

J: The relationship?

M: How do you work with or relate to the Far Eastern Bureau, in your case?

J: There are no fixed rules and there is no set pattern. This is largely a matter of personality and a man's own inclination, his working habits, et cetera, et cetera. I worked very closely with the Far East Bureau in State. I dealt regularly with Bill Bundy and his deputies, Len Unger and Marshall Green, and Phil Habib and all of the people who were working with him. I also dealt very closely with country directors, dealing with individual countries, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, et cetera, et cetera. So I had very close and regular working relations with the State Department and with the bureau, particularly the Far East Bureau.

Perhaps a part of that is because I had worked in State, I knew all of the people, and there was just no problem. I would think if you got a man into the NSC staff who hadn't worked in government before but who was an expert in the area, you might have quite a different relationship.

M: You don't think there's a problem involved, even unconscious on your part, of imposing your views on the department because of your location in the White House?

J: No.

M: When you call up a country director he doesn't think to himself, "Well, I better adopt what Bill Jorden said because that may be the President talking."?

J: No, I don't think so. I would like to think that that wasn't true. I think what I would do is very often just call a man or go see him or have him come over to see me to discuss a problem and to find out what he knew about it and how State was looking at it, how soon it was likely to become a problem on which decisions had to be made, and was there anything we should be doing to sort of prepare the President for the fact that in a week or in a month here was something that was coming up that he might want to start thinking about--that kind of thing.

Or in dealing with a problem I might have an idea of how it should be done and simply pass it along to my colleagues at State for their consideration. If it made sense they might go ahead and do it, and if it didn't they would tell me so. There was no--

M: I'm sure there wouldn't be any conscious--

J: How much unconscious reaction there is in this kind of thing God only knows.

M: When you've been around Washington for just a little while you find out what proximity to the President means in terms of people's estimate of your importance. It would be difficult to keep that from happening.

J: That's true, that's true.

M: What about personal contact with the President among people below the national security adviser himself--people in your position? Was it

extensive as time went along?

J: It was fairly extensive because very often I would have to, say, accompany an ambassador who was calling on the President from my area, or dealing with a visiting prime minister or foreign minister who was paying a call, in which case I had to prepare material for the President so that he would know what the problems were with this country and something about the man himself, et cetera, et cetera. So I did see him. I saw him at close range fairly extensively and then on trips when my area was involved.

M: Which it usually was in your time.

J: I generally traveled with him and helped him in every way I could.

M: You saw him acting as a personal diplomat. How would you estimate him as a personal diplomat?

J: I would estimate him as absolutely superb. I've never seen anyone in my life who could cope with this kind of problem better than President Johnson and I've seen a lot of men dealing with representatives of other countries over the years, both as a newspaperman and in government. I just don't know of anybody who does it better than he does. He has a warmth and a seriousness and a sincerity that just comes across in personal relations. I don't know of any head of government or chief of state or foreign minister who didn't sense that after they'd been with him for about ten minutes.

M: Did he master the details of whatever problem was involved with a visiting diplomat or visiting chief of state himself?

J: Very much. He has a very quick mind and he absorbs things fast. He

also has a prodigious memory. There never was any problem about his being on top of a set of problems. You know, he could read a briefing memo before meeting someone and remember all of it and cover all of the points that he wanted to cover without any difficulty at all. But the main thing I think is not the mastery of technical details as much as the way of conveying them and of dealing with people. And I've seen him with so many different kinds of people. I think a lot of Americans have a view of the President as a sort of rough, crude frontiersman. And he is that, he is that when the circumstances are right. But he can also be a very effective, suave, polished diplomat when he has to be.

But I've seen him dealing with people as different in temperament and so on as the Prime Minister of Australia and General Ne Win of Burma. It would be hard to imagine individuals that are sort of farther at the poles in terms of background, philosophy, temperament. And he handled both of them superbly.

M: What about as a boss? The conventional wisdom has him blowing up at subordinates and getting out of sorts on minor details, persecuting people.

J: I have heard those tales. I can only say from a personal point of view he has never blown up at me. He has never been nasty or curt. I am sure there have been plenty of times when he has been short-tempered and so on, and I think it would be amazing if any man in that job who had to deal with a hundred or two hundred problems a day didn't sometimes lose his temper or feel that, you know, something he wanted

wasn't there, et cetera, et cetera. All I can say is that I have personally never encountered this. I've seen him when he has been under great tension and pressure and where he didn't like something that had been provided for him and that he wanted redone. I suppose from the point of view of the people doing it, it might have been unreasonable, but I've never seen him nasty to anybody, or vicious. Sometimes a little short-tempered.

M: How did the NSC staff relate to the rest of the White House staff? Did the rest of the White House staff involve themselves in foreign policy problems sometimes perhaps more than they should have?

J: It's hard to say. People did dip in and out and they would get their pet projects. I think that everybody who's interested in politics in one way or another becomes interested in foreign affairs. It would be very hard for a bunch of intelligent men not to have an interest in it. Very often other people in the White House, on the staff, had legitimate reasons for being involved in one or another problem because, you know, if you get, for example, in dealing with Malaysia and you're dealing with rubber and tin sales and so on, then the release of American rubber stockpiles, for example, into the market has an effect on our dealings with Malaysia. But the release of materials from the stockpile is a problem for the Department of Commerce.

M: And the domestic staff.

J: And the domestic staff. So you get this crossover very often in dealing with problems, where it's perfectly legitimate. In those cases we dealt very closely with our colleagues. There were times

when a few individuals, I think, were exceeding their charter and getting involved in things they didn't really understand, but thought they did. You know, a guy might know from a previous incarnation, an earlier job, a man who at this moment in history is in Washington representing another government. So they go out and have lunch together and the guy raises his problems. Then the White House man might try to involve himself in solving that problem instead of simply turning it over to the man who is responsible. You get a little of that. I don't remember any real problems in this area.

M: I was thinking particularly of Patrick Anderson's recent book on The Presidents' Men. It says fairly specifically that Moyers, for example, was running a kind of a dove network around the national security staff during the last part of his time there. Do you think that's accurate?

J: I don't know whether he was running a network. I haven't read the Anderson book, but I personally felt that Moyers got much too involved in foreign affairs, because he didn't know a great deal about foreign affairs. He had no background, no experience; he had never lived and worked abroad, but he did get involved in things just in the course of his job. After all, he had to get up and talk about these things every day. He had to know something about them. But it's very different to get up and answer a question about what we are doing on a given problem, or to discuss the coming visit of a prime minister--quite another thing to inject yourself into the formation of foreign policy.

M: I know at least one time you traveled with part of the domestic staff, Harry McPherson, to Vietnam in 1967, I believe. Why is the domestic

staff getting involved in a thing like that? Is that because of McPherson's speech writing responsibility?

J: It was because of the speech writing, yes. Harry was doing an awful lot of the drafting of the President's speeches and naturally a lot of the things that the President was saying concerned Vietnam. Harry had never been in Vietnam, so he just felt he had to get acquainted and get to know it. So I went out with him just to be with him, to be available, to give him all of the background that he was interested in, to suggest that he do this or see that person, or make some contacts with the Vietnamese whom I knew well. That was the only reason for it.

M: But that has no policy--

J: No policy.

M: Did you go with him to the Middle East then?

J: No.

M: You came back.

J: I came back, and he went on.

M: You didn't get involved in the war at the time as he did by accident?

J: No.

M: Then, of course, your final activity being a member of the delegation of the peace talks in 1968. Did you, while you were on Rostow's staff, work closely on the earlier attempts to get the negotiations going? You had also worked for Mr. Harriman. Was Harriman, at the time you worked for him, engaged in that part of the effort to get the negotiations going, as he later was?

J: Not so much in those days, no. A little bit. But the main effort to get the talks going was 1966, 1967.

M: This was Marigold?

J: This was when I was in the White House. I was very involved in that whole process, following it very closely.

M: The critics on that, of course. . . Have you read the Kraslow and Loory account of some of those negotiations?

J: Yes.

M: How accurate or inaccurate have they been in their investigations?

J: Oh, I don't know how you--you know--

M: Well, of course, but say on Marigold?

J: I'd give them a B minus.

M: That's a pretty good way to estimate it probably. Of course, obviously their assumption is that we were not very interested in getting them started.

J: This is what I was going to say. How do you take a report like that? The facts may be 75 per cent wrong, 25 per cent wrong. The conclusions might be 100 per cent wrong. I just happen to think that their basic conclusion that we weren't interested or that we missed opportunities or that some of the things they had written about really had serious promise of producing peace or negotiations is just wrong. It's wrong because one thing I think is just totally misunderstood and that is there are no men in this country who would have been happier if we could have gotten into negotiations and found a peaceful solution than President Johnson and Walt Rostow and me and a few others who were working eighteen hours a day and killing themselves to try to find answers and to find possibilities.

M: What about the general point they make, and others make, that at times there were tactical actions taken that might have contributed toward making it more difficult, such as the bombing that took place during the middle of Marigold, such as the change of instructions to Chester Cooper in London when he had to withdraw the note to Wilson and so on?

J: Cooper just exceeded his instructions, that's all.

M: So these were not errors that were, in all cases, made as a matter of policy, but things just happened in some cases.

J: You know, when you're involved in a war and you've got several hundred thousand men concerned; when you've got a complicated governmental structure; when you have people from perhaps fifteen other governments scurrying around in one place or another trying to do this or that, with your knowledge or without your knowledge; at certain points, you know, things are going to happen here that don't relate to something that's going on there. I don't say that this didn't occasionally happen, because it did. What I'm trying to say is that it's remarkable that it didn't happen more often. Second, it is quite clear that if the other side was interested in serious negotiations and peace, they would not have done some things tactically that they did at certain critical moments. But I don't find that in the Loory book.

M: No, that's not there. What you're really saying is that nothing that was done would have stopped the chance for negotiations had the other side been interested in doing--

J: No, I'm utterly convinced of that.

M: What then led to the break that got the partial bombing halt which

started the talks in early 1968? Was it one of these initiatives that had been going on for some time before that finally bore fruit?

J: I'm not quite clear what you're getting at. What was it that did what?

M: That led--

J: That led Hanoi to accept, or led us to stop the bombing?

M: That led the United States to make the decision on the partial bombing halt which I presume is the key move here. In other words, were there deals with Hanoi that led us to do that? Or was this a decision we took based on our own resources?

J: Basically it was our decision. There had been some contacts with Hanoi that were not very fruitful or promising. But I think that basically the decision in March was one made unilaterally on our part without any promise on the other side or any suggestion except. . . Of course, the President was constantly being barraged with ideas and suggestions from various people--U Thant and so on--who were always saying, "Well, if the bombing stopped, peace will come." There were people in our government, particularly in the Congress, who were pushing this. You know, "Let's make another effort toward peace." Well, I think the President--he had tried this before. He'd tried stopping the bombing for various periods. Nothing happened. He was very skeptical about it but I think he just began to feel in March, "Well, let's try it once more and maybe it'll work. A lot of these people tell me it has a chance, so let's give it a try."

You know, for the previous two years he had tried various things. He had sent representatives to talk to other governments, asking them

to get in touch with Hanoi and find out if there wasn't some reasonable basis for at least discussion of the problem in secret or in public or in any other fashion. We talked to the Russians about it. We talked to various Asian governments about it and asked them to make contact. There were discussions, you know, in Saigon between Lodge and the Polish representative on the ICC, which looked as though it might have some promise. It turned out the Poles just had absolutely no charter from Hanoi to represent them. But, in any case, the whole series of efforts and attempts and probes and so on had gone on. The President really wanted to find a peaceful solution to this thing and I guess in March he decided, "Well, with all that I've heard and so on I don't see anything that convinces me that they will react, but on the off chance they might react, let's give it a try." So he went ahead.

M: So it wasn't as a result of a signal from them.

J: No. As a matter of fact, I think almost everybody--

M: We were talking to the Rumanians at this point, weren't we? Weren't they the channel we were using in the early part of 1968?

J: That's right. But nothing came through the Rumanian channel that was any different than, for example, the interview that Deputy Prime Minister Trinh had given in January. I think most people were surprised that Hanoi reacted as fast as they did to the President's offer.

M: What about the accuracy or inaccuracy of the current press imbroglio, the Post, Newsweek version of events in March of the Wise Men and so on. How accurate or inaccurate, or how influential, were those events in causing this decision of the President's?

J: It's hard to say. I haven't had a chance to really sit down and talk to the President about this since those accounts appeared except very briefly. I think that probably the meeting of the Wise Men had some influence on his thinking. I don't think it's true that he was shocked that the views were as they were because, you know, these are all men he had known for a long time. He knew pretty much what most of them were thinking. There were certainly a lot of people in that group who did not favor a bombing pause and felt that he ought to do more rather than less in terms of fighting the war, et cetera, et cetera. There was quite a cross-section of opinion but the fact is a few members of that group did believe that another effort should be made.

I think a lot of them were not thinking in terms of, "Let's stop the bombing and find peace," as much as, "Let's stop the bombing and prove once again that Hanoi doesn't want peace."

M: Which is an entirely different thing.

J: Which is quite different. It's quite different.

M: Were there important ones of them who had drastically changed their opinion in, say, the preceding year that might have had particular effect because of that?

J: I haven't read the proceedings of those meetings yet. You know, I have had hearsay and I've talked to some of the men who were involved. I don't think that anybody did a 180 degree turn in the previous year, but I think that there were a few who had earlier been totally in support of policy who now had grown deeply concerned about the extent of our commitment and involvement and felt that we should explore every

possibility of bringing it to an end. And I think this had its effect on the President in his thinking. As I say, I don't think he was shocked or amazed, but I think that just having that kind of discussion and getting these various views had an impact on him.

M: Well, he respected the men that were there, obviously.

J: Deeply respected them or they wouldn't have been there. So it did have an influence. One of the most interesting and surprising things about this discussion of his decision to go ahead with the bombing halt is that the stories that have been written in the Times and Newsweek and the Post, et cetera, et cetera, give credit to Secretary Clifford for suggesting this, and to Harry McPherson. And the fact is that the first man who suggested it to the President when he was going through this process was Dean Rusk.

M: The exact opposite: the hero becomes the villain, the villain becomes the hero almost in that case.

J: Exactly.

M: So the statement issued from down here that it was inaccurate will presumably clear that up sometime.

J: Oh, yes, it will certainly be in the President's book, if it doesn't come out sooner.

M: Then you went to Paris when--in April?

J: We went in May--May 9.

M: May. Did you have a special position as the President's staff representative on the delegation?

J: No. We all went as members of the delegation, as members of the team.

You had Harriman and Vance as personal representatives of the President, and then General Goodpaster from the joint chiefs and Phil Habib from the State Department and me from the White House. But we were in Paris as members of the delegation, as advisers to the two chief delegates. So I wasn't there to represent White House interests, except insofar as White House interests were the national interest.

M: How close did the President get himself involved in the week-to-week work of the talks between April and October?

J: He followed the talks very closely. He obviously took a deep interest in every significant decision that had to be made, whether we would do this or do that, and so on, and how we would present the case to the North Vietnamese. So I would say he followed developments very closely and kept his hand very much on the throttle as far as strategic or tactical decisions were concerned. You know, he didn't involve himself in rewriting the statements that we were going to make. The statements were written in Paris. We sent them back to the State Department for any comment. Generally the comments we got were very minor and suggested changing this word to that word, or getting a little more in on a given subject, et cetera, that sort of thing.

M: What finally caused the breakthrough of October 10-11? The movement on the other side or some new proposal by the United States?

J: Well, it wasn't a sudden and dramatic and new proposal.

M: By either side.

J: By either side. I mean this went through quite a period of time and our basic position remained pretty much the same. The problem here

was the Hanoi delegation was insisting on a halt to the bombing that was permanent and unconditional. So every time we would raise the subject of, "Okay, we'll stop the bombing, and then what," they would say, "Well, then we'll talk." The President felt that we had to have a little more than that, that stopping the bombing did give them the opportunity for military actions that would not otherwise have been possible, or would have been possible only at great cost. Therefore in the course of the talks we emphasized two things which were stated by the President in his October 31 speech, which is respect for the demilitarized zone and no bombing or rocket attacks on the major cities--indiscriminate attacks. We didn't say the level of the war has to go down or that they have to stop hitting what they would regard as legitimate military targets, but that dropping rockets into the center of towns and killing women and children and so on, or moving forces through or into the DMZ would be taken by us as an act of bad faith.

M: We didn't have any agreement on our level of ground activity involved in this?

J: No.

M: Our part was simply the cessation of the bombing?

J: Cessation of the bombing which should lead to prompt talks and productive talks.

M: And so what happened was--

J: And so what happened--they didn't sign any documents. We just reached the point where we felt sure that they knew exactly what we were talking about, what we accepted and that while they couldn't say what they would

do, that there was a tacit understanding on this. They couldn't say, "Okay, we understand and therefore we won't do this," because they had said for how many years that the bombing had to be unconditional. So we had to find some way around this hurdle.

M: They have politics at home, too.

J: They have their own problems and we had to find some formula which could be regarded as unconditional by them and as conditional by us.

M: The Russians were generally assumed to have been helpful. How?

J: They were modestly helpful. They were modestly helpful in telling us that after dealing with the North Vietnamese and talking to them that, yes, the North Vietnamese did understand what we were talking about and that they would--

M: Confirming your understanding.

J: That's right.

M: What about the press? You were our spokesman. Was the press reasonably responsible in this highly delicate period here?

J: I think the press was terribly responsible in Paris, yes. First of all, it was a good press corps by and large. There were some sour apples, but there always are. You know,you can't have five or six hundred men trying to cover a story like this without having a few clunks--people who just imagine things or spread rumors, or you know, get something from somebody else, but don't check it with somebody else to make sure it's right. There were some who were being deliberately used by the Communists to spread the party line, et cetera, et cetera. But by and large the Western press corps in Paris was a damned good press corps.

It was made up for the most part of experienced men, serious men, men who had covered this kind of thing for years and so on. You just couldn't get better people than guys like John Hightower of the Associated Press and Stuart Hensley of United Press and Tom Fenton of the Baltimore Sun and Art Dommen of the Los Angeles Times and Murray Marder of the Washington Post. Just damned good reporters and serious men who weren't--

M: I guess it didn't really leak until right on the eve of the President's being ready to announce it.

J: That's right. It was rather remarkable. There were no leaks of any significance out of Paris during the nine months I was there.

M: And that is really remarkable! (Laughter)

J: I don't know of any other time it has ever happened.

M: What about the people in Paris' understanding of what our understanding was with Saigon, as to their willingness to join these talks, that caused trouble after President Johnson's announcement? As far as the Paris delegation was concerned, was that a fairly explicit agreement on their part to participate?

J: Yes, we thought it was, we thought it was. We had been assured by Saigon, by the embassy, that the Vietnamese government did understand the your-side/our-side formula, and had accepted it. It's still not clear to me where the misunderstanding came, but the fact is that when suddenly faced with the prospect of, not a general proposition, but sending a delegation to Paris to start talking to the other side that the Vietnamese government got cold feet and began to worry about a lot

of things that they should have worried about earlier. And they felt that there were just certain things they had to go through in terms of their own domestic politics before they could undertake this step. We were interested in getting the talks started as fast as possible. They were interested in preparing their own public opinion and their own legislature for what for them was a very major step.

M: The fact that the American political scene was emerging as it was, playing a role in their questions, too--the fact that the election had come and gone and a new man had won.

J: No, because this problem came up before the election.

M: That's right. It was within a few days.

J: The critical time was, you know, the last week or two in October. Now, what effect the American electoral scene had on feelings in Saigon I don't know yet. I have some suspicions. I suspect that there were some people in the Saigon government who felt that their country and their cause would get a better deal from Nixon than from Humphrey, and that stalling on the peace talks would tend to harm Humphrey and help Nixon.

M: So it might have had something to do with American politics even though it did come before the [election].

J: Oh, yes, because it was just before the election. If a man felt that way he might say, "Well, let's stall until after the election," because if they didn't stall and they went to Paris and the talks started, a lot of Americans might think, "Well, the Johnson-Humphrey Administration has done a good job here. They've got the show on the road. We'd better let Hubert finish it.

M: It's easy to see.

J: But if things were still up in the air and so on, he wouldn't benefit from that mood. So it may be this was an element. I'm not prepared to say. All I've got is suspicions.

M: What about movement after the talks began? Was there any significant progress to turn over to the Nixon Administration by the time you left, or were things pretty much marking time awaiting the new American team?

J: What happened of course was that, first of all, the government of Vietnam finally did send a delegation. We had that long wrangle about procedures, which from the point of view of an American was really a phony kind of argument and superficial and all the rest of it, but from the point of view of the Vietnamese it wasn't. And I mean South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese, and Liberation Front and so on.

M: It was a substantive issue.

J: For them it was, because it reflected some serious political matters in that country about who represents what and the status of the front, specifically; and from the Communist side the status of the government of Vietnam, the Saigon government, because they had flatly refused to deal with the Thieu-Ky clique, as they called it. Here they were suddenly faced with the problem of sitting down at the same table with them. So how do you arrange this in a way that permits you to live with what you've said before and what your past policies have been?

M: So that was movement in itself?

J: And the fact that, first of all, you've got four delegations there. You did settle the procedural wrangle and you did get the talks started.

That, I think, was some accomplishment. In terms of settling the war in Vietnam, there has been no progress that I can see.

M: Was the Harriman-Vance delegation engaged in private talks--as the current team apparently, at least up until now, has not been--before they left Paris?

J: Oh, yes. That whole subject, of course, strikes a very sensitive nerve with me because I went through nine and a half months in which I simply refused to talk about private talks. I adopted that policy very early in the game before the talks had started and that made it easier for me once private talks were underway to simply stick to my old consistent position and have nothing to say. So when I hear that subject come up my automatic reaction is, "Well, that's something I don't talk about."

Yes, we were in private talks. As a matter of fact, I had the first private talk with the North Vietnamese.

M: Is that easy to accomplish without spotlight? It looks to me like it would be almost impossible to accomplish it physically.

J: Well, we did it. We did it.

M: So it's possible the current ones are doing it as well, but without knowledge, I suppose.

J: It is possible, I don't think they are. But I don't rule it out. They hadn't by the time I left. The only contact has been on technical questions. Cy Vance, I know, took Judge Walsh who was replacing him as the number two man in the delegation and introduced him to his counterpart on the North Vietnamese delegation, Ha Van Lao. So Walsh knew him and had met him. The opportunity was there for following that up if both

sides agreed that it was useful. As of the time I left Paris there had been no private contact. Whether there has been any in the last two weeks or so, I can't say.

M: Obviously, in talking to you, I'm at the mercy of what has been published and there's not very much on someone who has held your positions. Are there any things we haven't talked about that you think should be important to put down here before we finish?

J: I don't think so.

M: I don't mean to cut you off or limit you in any way. I'm at your disposal.

J: No, I understand. I thought at the outset our principal concern was President Johnson, and we have talked about a great many other things. But they are all pertinent because they are things that were happening under him and either at his direction or under his control.

M: That's how we see the function of our project.

J: So it relates very directly to the whole record of this man in the presidency, and how business was conducted, so it is pertinent.

M: I think it has been worthwhile and I surely thank you for your generous time on Saturday morning like this. I appreciate it very much.

J: Great pleasure.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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