INTERVIEW III

DATE: August 13, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM J. JORDEN

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Ambassador Jorden's residence, McLean, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: McGeorge Bundy was on the original public affairs committee that was dealing with Vietnam, I think, wasn't he? Did he chair it? Do you recall that?

J: Jesus, I don't. I think he was. I think he was, although I don't know how active a role he took. It seems to me I recall a meeting or two meetings or something when he was present and chairing, but--

G: The reason I was asking is when they had that first big teach-in, you may remember, he was supposed to participate, but he pulled out. I've always puzzled about that.

J: Oh, yes. That's right. Yes.

G: I never got a satisfactory answer from anybody who knew as to what was behind that.

J: Why he backed out?

G: Why he backed out.

J: I don't really know. I don't really know. I remember, now that you mention it, that it did happen.

G: I notice that in the minutes of a couple of meetings there was a mention of a need to update, and I'm quoting, "Zorthian's terms of reference," unquote. Was there some kind of a problem with what Barry Zorthian was

supposed to be doing as public information officer in Saigon? Do you remember any difficulty about that?

J: No, I don't. I don't recall. When did Barry go to Saigon, do you remember?

G: He went in early 1964, I believe.

J: Yes, I think that's right.

G: And Lodge was there then, and it was pretty well known that Lodge was his own public-affairs officer. Then he [Lodge] left, of course, in June of 1964, and I'm wondering if--

J: To run for president. Yes.

G: Or get Scranton elected or block Goldwater or whatever.

J: Well, to take an active role in the campaign.

G: And I was wondering if this in any way promoted Zorthian.

J: Well, I can't with honesty say I know or that this is the way it was. I really don't know. I'd just be guessing.

G: Fine.

J: Barry was an activist, and I think he felt that the role of the press in information and so on was more important than some people were giving it credit for and so on. But I can't give you a definitive answer.

G: Let me ask you a question about another personality, and that's Bill Moyers. Was he interested in Vietnam for more than the public affairs side of it? Was he interested in getting some policy input, that you know of?

J: Not that I know of.

G: That issue has been raised by a couple of people. I thought you might have an insight into it.

J: No, I don't. I'm not aware of any policy input that Bill ever made. As press secretary he had to field a lot of questions and so on, but my impression was that he was mainly interested--although, you know, people who get in that kind of a job and who have lively minds, almost inevitably get into policy, or want to get into policy, and begin thinking fine thoughts and so on. But he had obviously no expertise in the Far East or in Vietnam or in military affairs. I don't remember his ever having any policy input as such into that mix.

G: Here is an interesting statement that you made, and you may remember making it; you may not.

J: Doubtless not.

G: You said that at times the media reports coming out of Vietnam had been more accurate than our official statements. And I wondered if you had anything specific in mind when you--

J: When was this said?

G: This would have been in probably August or September of 1965, pretty early.

J: In what context did I say it?

G: At a meeting. One of the meetings--

J: Oh, yes. Well, let's see. I was then--what? Deputy assistant secretary for public affairs, and really, it was the Vietnam thing that was my whole plate. I mean, I wasn't fooling around with anything else at that point; it was purely Vietnam. And that's how I got involved in all these working groups and so on.

G: Right.

J: Well, knowing my feeling about how inaccurate the press was in Vietnam, I have since those days been highly critical of the way the Vietnam War was reported. That just doesn't sound characteristic of me although, you know, I'm realistic enough, and I've lived long enough to know that very often press reports are more accurate and revealing than some official reports. All I can imagine is that I was thinking of the reporting of guys like Pete Braestrup and Keyes Beech and others whose work I respect, and I think that very often in their reporting one got an insight into a situation or a mood or an action that one didn't get in the action reports that were coming through official channels, often through eight filters and so on and so on.

G: In that connection--

J: But my general thrust on this is that in general the press reporting in Vietnam was highly inaccurate and emotional and designed to inflame rather than inform.

G: One thing that comes out of these minutes is your concern for the Vietnamese end of public relations, and you refer several times to the fact that the Vietnamese just aren't beating their own drum enough; they're not getting their own story out.

J: Yes, that was a--I felt that fairly strongly, almost from the outset, and I felt that it was a terrible mistake for the United States to take over as the press spokesman, the media spokesman, and so on, with absolutely no goddamn representation from the Vietnamese government. I thought it was atrocious. First of all, psychologically, it was bad that the spokesman for everything that was going on should be an American; but second, I thought that through that process what the

Vietnamese were doing--and very often they were doing a hell of a lot--was not getting any attention at all. And the press reporters were only interested in what the American forces were doing. They only covered American forces. They almost never went out with a Vietnamese unit, and I just thought it was atrocious. Of course, I fought very hard to get some kind of a Vietnamese spokesman at least on a co-equal basis so that one guy could talk about the American actions, and the other guy could talk about Vietnamese actions and so on and get a little more balanced picture.

Well, as I remember, they finally tried this, and they got some asshole to do the Vietnamese side of the thing, and he was a total disaster, and that really irritated me because I knew how many able Vietnamese there were, and guys who were smart, who were fluent in English and who could deal with the press, and so on and so on, and if they had picked one of those guys, it really could have made a huge difference. I don't know how that came out later, you know; I was involved in other things later on, but anyway, that was my pitch, and I felt strongly about it. Well, also, I kept pushing for some kind of an intelligent information system in the Vietnamese embassy here in Washington, and they finally did. They sent Bui Diem as ambassador, and they did try to beef up--and as a matter of fact, it did work very well because Bui Diem was smart, and he had some good people around him. Don Duc Khoi was in the embassy for a while. And they began to get through to the American press with a bit of a Vietnamese point of view, which had been sadly lacking in the early years.

G: Khoi had been Diem's public relation man, had he not?

J: At one point.

G: Yes. I thought I'd heard his name before.

J: Well, I don't know if he was his public relations man. At least, he was involved in information under Diem. Then he was [Nguyen Cao] Ky's spokesman. He was very close to Ky.

G: Sounds like he had a talent for survival, too.

J: Oh, yes. He was one of the smartest people I ever knew. And then he was in the embassy here and was spokesman for the embassy. A very able, smart guy.

G: Do you know what became of him?

J: He died about three years ago, had a heart attack in his early fifties.

G: And Bui Diem is in town, of course.

J: Bui Diem is in town, yes. Well, you've talked to him down in--

G: Yes, I'm supposed to see him tomorrow.

J: Did you get him on tape?

G: Yes. I'm supposed to see him again tomorrow.

J: Excellent.

G: I'm trying to get him to go to dinner with me. I don't know if I'm going to have any luck there, but--

J: Well, I don't see why not. As you know, he's writing a book, and so he is--first of all, he's not only a bright fellow with a fairly good memory, but he's been going through all this stuff, so his recollections should be quite fresh.

G: Right. Right.

J: He'll be good.

G: Yes. I have a note here [that] you went to Vietnam in September of 1965, and one of the recommendations you had was that we had to improve facilities for transmitting copy for the newsmen, and that we needed to be more forthcoming about transportation for them over there.

J: Yes.

G: How were they transmitting copy at the time? What were their facilities like?

J: Oh, Jesus. Well, I don't really remember.

G: Okay.

J: I just remember that I was then in the public affairs section of State, and when I went out, obviously, I talked to a lot of old friends and new friends in the press business, and that was a major gripe. My recollection is that they were sending it through the telegraph office. I don't know which one, whether it was IT&T or whatever, but there were always backlogs, and they'd get five hundred pages of copy, and the last page would get transmitted a day or two days later. It was just an inept operation, and these guys felt strongly about it. I mean, there is nothing a reporter is more concerned with than first, getting a story, and then getting it out. They came to me, bitching and moaning about it, and so, obviously, I wanted to--as I recall, one of the things was getting more operators into the telegraph office to handle this flood of copy and improve the telephone service, because a lot of guys, if they had good telephone service they could call Tokyo and dictate, and their office in Tokyo could pick it up and transmit it to the United States.

G: What about transportation around the country? I know later that situation seems to have improved a good deal, but I gather that in 1965 they were still having difficulties.

J: Still having problems, and of course every reporter thinks that the United States Army or Air Force should have a helicopter waiting twenty-four hours a day for him to go from Saigon to Danang or wherever he wants to go, and if it's not there or if eight people have to be crowded aboard a helicopter and go somewhere that the guy doesn't want to go, they bitch and moan. But it was, I think, not good in 1965, and I simply made the point that we would save ourselves a lot of trouble if we took some steps to get these guys out where the action was a little more expeditiously.

Then another problem was that they'd go out into the Highlands or wherever and then maybe get stuck, and they'd get the story, but they couldn't get it out because they couldn't get back to a cable head. So it was transportation both ways that was a problem.

G: Right. Well, I guess as the American war machine built up that tended to get solved because there were just more helicopters.

J: Oh, just more helicopters and more jeeps and more whatever one needed to go from A to B, and it just solved itself. Also, I think that with the passage of time, military units, especially the higher echelons, became more and more sensitive to "keeping the press happy," unquote, and so I think they went out of their way to be accommodating.

G: Here's a name that just dredged up: Fritz Freund. Did you know him? He was a sort of assistant to Zorthian. He was an army--

J: Fritz--?

G: Freund. He may pronounce it "friend." It's F-r-e-u-n-d, and he was a colonel, I think.

J: Well, it sounds vaguely familiar, but I sure didn't know him.

G: I thought you may have come across him.

J: No.

G: One item, and this is kind of out of context, one of the meeting notes refers to "mail from Quakers going through Canada to North Vietnam," and asks Joe Califano to "get with Jorden on this." Do you recall what that was about?

J: No, I can't say I do.

G: I was mystified. I couldn't imagine what was behind it or what the concern was. Well, at any rate--

J: Quakers?

G: Quakers. "Mail from Quakers going through Canada to Hanoi."

J: I don't know what that was about. They may have been asking if they could make arrangements to send a delegation to Hanoi or something like that, probably.

G: Yes. Or medicines or something.

J: Or medical supplies. Yes. Yes, that begins to strike a bell. Yes. I think they were interested in providing humanitarian assistance, including medical supplies, to the North Vietnamese, [God save us?].

G: Here's one that's dated in November of 1965 and has to do with Freedom House. There had been an overture from Freedom House. They wanted to do something for public opinion regarding Vietnam, and it's suggested that somebody needs to take the matter up informally with them because there's some concern that they don't want an official link, obviously,

between the government and Freedom House because it would lose some credibility. I would guess that was the concern. Did you have anything to do with that, that you recall?

J: Jesus! Probably. (Laughter)

G: Probably.

J: Probably.

G: Okay. Here's a reference to that famous CBS-TV news show that Morley Safer did when they used the Zippo lighters on the--

J: Oh Jesus, yes.

G: --village. Mr. [Arthur] Sylvester, it says, brought it up and says, "It's sort of a typical thing of an unfriendly foreign correspondent who is choosing to show us in a bad light," and he refers to Morley Safer as a "Canadian subject." I heard that that struck a spark off LBJ later, or maybe at the time. Did you get any feedback on that at all?

J: I can't think of anything directly. I know it raised a hell of a stink at the time and irritated a lot of us, but--now I remember. You know, we had Morley Safer from Canada; we had Peter Arnett from Australia; and somebody from France, and--

G: Is that François Sully?

J: François Sully. And none of them seemed to be terribly pro-American. (Laughter) And they seemed to go out of their way to knife the Americans and so on, and it was just a constant source of irritation. Of course, having come through the Korean experience with Wilfred Burchette and Alan Winnington, I was rather sensitive to what these goddamned foreigners were doing to us, and I was very suspicious of their motives. But I remember its causing great unhappiness.

Now, it seems to me that I do remember later LBJ making some rather sour comments about Morley Safer and so on, but also he made some sour comments about Mike Wallace and "that whole goddamned 'Sixty Second' crew."

(Laughter)

G: Is that his term?

J: I don't know if there was "Sixty Minutes" in those days.

G: Yes.

J: But that whole crowd, you know. I remember Mike Wallace came down and interviewed LBJ, and it was a goddamned disaster.

G: Were you involved in that?

J: Yes, in trying to prepare the old man for the kind of questions he might get, and documents to refresh his memory, and so on and so on. I thought Mike Wallace--well, it was just a typical Wallace hatchet job, in my judgment.

G: Something that occurs to me, too, happens in the spring of 1965 that you may be conversant with. In April, as I recall, the mission of the marines who had already gone underwent a change. They were told they could be more aggressive; they could go--

J: Aggressive patrolling and so on.

G: --go to the assistance of the ARVN if they were called on, and so on and so on. And this story had some difficulty, as I recall, getting out because the official pronouncement was, "The mission hasn't changed. What they are doing, they've always been doing." Do you remember any of that?

J: Yes, there was terrible confusion. Terrible confusion. And I think LBJ was just terribly sensitive about this representing any change, and everybody and his brother knew it represented a change. And that was a case, as I remember, where the story coming out of Danang, I believe--weren't the marines based in Danang?

G: Yes. Or Chu Lai; I forget which.

J: One or the other. The stories out of there were much more accurate than the things the Pentagon spokesman and the White House spokesman and so on were saying at this end of the line, and--you want to turn that off? (Interruption)

G: Let's see. I had just shown you this piece of paper which referred to the Vietnam Psychological Strategy Committee, or Monday group, which was formed around early 1967. What was that about? Do you recall?

J: Well, I don't remember much about it as a group. My recollection is that it didn't last very long. I had gone to the White House in 1966 as a senior staffer on the Far East, which meant everything from Korea to Burma. I had one deputy who was a China specialist and a China watcher, and another who concentrated on pretty much the rest of Asia except Vietnam. I always, because of past interest, watched Japan and Korea myself pretty closely, but my main function was Vietnam. And we set up--and I don't remember--I think in 1966 or early 1967--this kind of psyops [psychological operations] team in the White House, in the Old Executive [Office] Building. And I had a staff of, I guess, five or six guys that were working full time on Vietnam information, sending people out to the teach-ins and the student meetings in universities all over the country; supplying information to the press; doing all the things

that one has to do in order to try to get the story of Vietnam out in some kind of balanced fashion.

I am not sure. It seems to me that I set that up early in 1966, soon after--I think I went to the White House in April of 1966, and this would have been set up soon thereafter, as I remember. I don't think it was an offshoot of this Monday group, but I may be mistaken about that. In any case, I think that simply reflects the feeling that existed at that time that the government's position on Vietnam and what was really happening in Vietnam were not getting much of a shake in the daily press coverage, and that something had to be done about it, plus coping with all of the growing unrest on campuses around the country and peace groups and so on and so on, to try to counter all of that crap--not crap, but often crap. So I was deeply involved in this, but I don't remember--I remember vaguely that we had some of these high-level meetings with [Walt] Rostow and [Dean] Rusk, and CIA and Defense, et cetera. I don't think that that group ever--I don't think it lasted long, and I don't think it did very much. I think it pretty much fell on me, and I had regular meetings with people from State and people from Defense and CIA a couple of times a week to make plans, to get people and so on and so on, and to spot problems. And that was really a full-time job from 1966 to early 1968.

G: You were fighting the credibility problem, in other words.

J: Indeed. Yes.

G: Yes. Where did we go wrong there? What undercut our credibility, in your opinion?

J: Well, I think our biggest single problem was the quality and attitude of many of the reporters who were covering the war. And, of course, it's awfully hard to separate out, how did a peace demonstration get started at the University of Michigan, or why was there a sit-in at Columbia, and so on. Well, we know, and we knew at the time, that there were a number of radical students and students who were associated with either very left-wing or pacifist groups that were terribly active. I've often felt that a lot of them simply did not want to serve in the armed forces of the United States, and if they weren't demonstrating, they were running off to Sweden and Canada and so on. But in any case, what fed this attitude? What fed the attitude of the American people? And as you know, it did spread, and I think by the early 1970s there were an awful lot of Americans who felt we should get the hell out of there or bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age.

G: Yes. Well, they didn't have far to go.

J: But I have always believed that there was just a sea change in the quality of the American press between 1953 and 1965. In the Korean War, the vast majority of American reporters were patriotic; they wanted the United States to win. They were not inclined to go out of their way to find problems and so on, although they reported the problems in a balanced way. But they had a much more positive outlook toward what we were doing and why we were doing it. Although, you remember, that there was a hell of a lot of misunderstanding about what we were doing in Korea, but it was not nearly as bad as it was in Vietnam and as it became in Vietnam.

You had a lot of young reporters who were not very experienced; you had a lot of reporters who were looking for sensation; you had reporters who were almost determined to be critical of us and of the Vietnamese. And when people like that started winning Pulitzer Prizes for their glorious exposés and so on, then it became an epidemic in the press corps, and people began to think, "Well, that's the way to get ahead in this business. That's the way to win prizes and double your salary." And there weren't enough good, steady, experienced old hands. There were some but not enough to balance this tide, and I don't know of anything we could have done about that. That was a function of the editorial responsibility of American publications and networks and so on, and my personal feeling is that by the early 1960s, there were not many good editors left in the United States, and they were becoming more and more permissive. They were letting young reporters get away with murder, with reporting emotions and feelings and attitudes and so on, not simply straight facts. It was, as I say, a sea change in the quality of the American press, and what could have been done about it, I don't know. I went through a couple of years of very painful effort trying to balance all this, with modest success, but we never caught up with the problem, never caught up with it. And it just went from bad to worse, and I think that by the end there wasn't one American in five hundred who believed that what we were doing was right and so on, although I think that in terms of public opinion and attitude, it was never as bad in 1967-68 as the press itself led us to believe. I think that there was even then a fairly large element of support for the government, for policy, if the government had been wise enough to say,

"Look, we've been in this thing long enough. We're going to end it. We're going to take some very severe measures. It's going to cost a very high price, but we're going to end this thing, and we're going to end it successfully."

G: Yes.

J: If the government had taken that position, I think they would have had widespread support.

G: LBJ made some very hawkish, if you will, speeches right after the Tet Offensive, as I recall, some very aggressive-sounding things. Do you remember anything about that? Who wrote those?

J: I dare say I did. (Laughter) I wrote my share of them, but I can't pin it down. I can't--

G: Then he backed away from that.

J: I wish to hell I'd kept more complete files, although I don't know what I'm going to find when I open up some of those boxes one of these days.

G: Let me ask you this--

J: But he did back away from it. And then he made a couple of very strong statements, but then, in early 1968, we went into the peace talks.

G: Well, there was the New Hampshire primary and then the March 31 speech.

J: Yes.

G: Did you have any input into the March 31 speech?

J: No, that came as a great surprise to me.

G: What was your reaction, as a public affairs expert? Do you remember who you were with and--?

J: Do you mean the speech where he [inaudible]?

G: Yes. Yes.

J: Well, as I remember, I was at home, hearing it on television.

G: What impact did it have on you?

J: I was appalled. I was appalled. I thought it was a terrible mistake. I didn't understand a lot of things then that I did later, but I just thought that it was a horrible mistake because I believed that everyone, including the North Vietnamese, would see it as a sign of weakness, that the American leader was throwing his hands in the air, and that they were going to misinterpret it; and what he intended as a really very major gesture in the direction of peace would be read as a gesture as a result of weakness, and that it would lengthen the war and complicate our problems.

Also, I thought he was a hell of a good president, and I wanted him to run again. As a matter of fact, I've always believed that he could have run again and that he would have been elected again, no question about it. But later, as I got to know him better and so on, I realized that his dominant feeling was that he wouldn't survive another term, and he was probably right.

G: Well, in terms of chronology, he just would have barely made it as it was.

J: He wouldn't have made it.

G: But he died in January of 1973.

J: Well, yes.

G: Just barely.

J: But the thing is, that came after four years of being at the Ranch, and sleeping long hours and so on and so on. If he'd been at the White House going through the grind that he went through the first five years,

who knows? He might not have lasted another two years under that strain.

G: Exactly.

J: So anyway, he was probably right, but at the time I just was appalled. I thought it was a disaster of the first order.

G: Were you surprised at the North Vietnamese response? As I recall, it was only four days later that--

J: No, I wasn't surprised. I assumed that they would read that as a sign of weakness and that would be the time to move. "We've got them on the ropes. Let's"--

G: Right.

J: But anyway--

G: How were you picked to go to Paris? Do you have any idea who named you?

J: I think Rostow told the President that he thought I should go. And I think Johnson himself wanted me to go because he didn't fully trust Averell Harriman. (Laughter)

G: Why do you say that?

J: Why do I say it? Well, I say it because I think that's exactly what he thought. As a matter of fact, when it was suggested that Harriman lead the delegation, he insisted that Cy Vance be on the delegation to balance Harriman because he thought Harriman was soft, not on communism but on Asia and communism in Asia, and he thought that Vance was tougher. Of course, it was assumed in the delegation, especially on the part of Harriman and Phil Habib and so on, that I had been sent to keep an eye on--

G: You were LBJ's man in Paris?

J: Yes. And to keep an eye on these bastards to make sure they didn't give away the family jewels.

G: Did LBJ--?

J: Which was not true. He never put it to me in that way, and Walt didn't. I was simply there because I had lived with the Vietnam thing for eight years--it was seven years at that point--and knew the story pretty well, and knew what was going on and believed very firmly in what we were trying to do. So I think the President and Rostow both felt a little more comfortable knowing that someone who felt as I did was in the middle of the delegation. Also, they wanted me to be the spokesman, so that there was no hanky-panky with the press, and the press didn't get a misleading view of what was going on and so on and so on. Well, it was a terribly thankless job, I can tell you. Getting up in front of anywhere from fifty to three hundred newspapermen every day to report that there was no progress, or that we were arguing about the shape of the goddamned table, was a very thankless piece of work, and I don't know how I survived it, and I don't know how I managed to retain my credibility with my press colleagues, but I guess I did.

G: Did they work you over pretty good at those sessions?

J: Well, they tried. They tried. I don't work over very easy, but they did their best. I knew what they were doing, and so it was an interesting chess game.

G: I've always thought, it's an interesting position to be a newspaperman who has taken on an official status. Does this carry any stigma among your colleagues? Do any of them resent--?

J: Yes, with some I think it does. I think with some it does. With others, who are a little more broad-minded and so on, it doesn't. But at this stage--in those days it was not too common. These days people are going in and out all the time, so it has become less of a problem. But anyway, in those days it was, and it did have a certain stigma, as you say. On the other hand, as a newspaperman I had a pretty good reputation, and when I was in government, I also had a reputation for not playing games and for not twisting the facts or lying or whatever, and reporters who came to me knew they would either get the story or they would get a good reason for not getting it, which was always my rule.

G: Right. I think we had better break here; it's noon.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III

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