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Oral History
Stanley Karnow

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INTERVIEW I

DATE: April 30, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: STANLEY KARNOW

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Karnow's residence, Potomac, Maryland

Tape 1 of 2

G: Mr. Karnow, would you begin by sketching for us your professional association with Southeast Asia?

K: It came rather late in my career, that is directly. I started working for ***Time*** magazine in Paris in 1950 and at that time the French war in Indochina was going on. So I had a good deal to do from the Paris end of covering the story, that is, from the French end of the story. And [I] became somewhat familiar with Vietnam, Indochina as it was called at the time, but not directly. I didn't have any trips out to Asia during that period.

As I say, I had to follow the political side of the story, which was having a tremendous impact on France throughout the mid-fifties, the early fifties to the mid-fifties. Of course, at that time I had other things to do, particularly covering the growing insurrections in North Africa, and I became increasingly associated with this Third World, being sent to the Middle East as well as operating in Morocco and Algeria, Tunisia, Libya.

Then in 1959 when I was covering the story and the war in Algeria, I can only presume that because I had developed some experience in that

kind of situation--that is kind of a suitcase job--that the editors of ***Time*** assigned me to go to Hong Kong to be the chief correspondent in Hong Kong for Southeast Asia and China. So that actually got me out there on the ground and that was my first direct contact with the area. I was to spend the next eleven years based in Hong Kong, and have been back to the area frequently even after leaving Hong Kong in 1970. So in a way I clocked a lot of time out there.

G: But you were based mainly in Hong Kong?

K: I was based in Hong Kong, which is something that a lot of correspondents did who had families, rather than have your dependents living in Saigon. We had two children who were born in Hong Kong, and we brought one out with us. It wasn't exactly a healthy place for wives and kids, in Saigon, so since Saigon was only an hour away from Hong Kong, it was convenient to live in Hong Kong and to shuttle back and forth.

G: What was it like to cover that Vietnam story, beginning in when, 1959?

K: Yes. It changed over the years. When I first arrived in the late fifties, in 1959, Saigon was really kind of a sleepy place and Vietnam was relatively calm. The communist insurgency was just beginning to gather some momentum but it was very sporadic. There were virtually no correspondents there at the time. None of the major news organizations, to my recollection, had staff correspondents based in Saigon, I think except for the news agencies. The ***New York Times*** had a visiting correspondent. Usually it was a person from Hong Kong who came down just the way I did.

I like to remember that the entire press corps, including the visitors, could in those days--1959, 1960, 1961 and even into 1962--the entire press corps could sit around the dining room table at the ambassador's house or go to lunch at the same restaurant; when you think that later when the war had escalated we were up to something like four hundred regular correspondents there.

So it was at the beginning a very placid place. That didn't necessarily mean that the story was any less complicated for that, but it was a good deal easier to begin to develop your Vietnamese sources. Now I want to take a step back and say that I had developed Vietnamese sources in Paris before that. In particular, I had originally met Ngo Dinh Diem, who was later to become president of Vietnam, in Paris in the spring of 1954, when he was returning to Vietnam to become prime minister. He had just been appointed prime minister by the Emperor Bao Dai.

During the period that I was covering the French end of the war, from 1950 to the time I left Paris in 1957, I had developed a good many Vietnamese sources; originally the Bao Dai people who were in Paris, various Vietnamese nationalists who were in Paris, and in particular became quite friendly with a young Vietnamese by the name of Ton That Thien, who was one of Diem's sympathizers and later was to become minister of information in the Diem government. He was the one who arranged my meeting with Diem, and I remember, in 1954--I can't remember

the month, but it had to be around May or June because he went back in July, to Saigon.

So one of the things I spent a lot of time on in those early days in Vietnam was to cultivate the Vietnamese. There wasn't a large American contingent in those days; there was just a handful of advisers, an embassy, and obviously a CIA station, and a few Americans around who were fairly knowledgeable. In particular there was a very strong, knowledgeable guy running the Asia Foundation, who was in fact a CIA guy under the cover of an Asia Foundation. And they were good sources.

G: You don't feel free to give his name?

K: Yes, his name was [SANITIZED] I don't know what's become of him. I haven't seen him in a long time.

But I spent a lot of time with the Vietnamese, and I think that one of the reasons why it was relatively easy to deal with them, if you want to use the word easy, was that I had had this background in France and the French colonies and I spoke French fluently. In those days a lot of the Vietnamese elites and even--you could go down [to] fairly low levels in Vietnam and find people who spoke French. That was one thing; I think language fluency was one thing.

The other thing was that having spent a long time in North Africa and to a certain extent the Middle East, I had learned to operate at that kind of a pace where you had to spend a long time just sitting around and talking, and beginning to develop sources slowly and not bringing to bear our own western timetable, which is to try to rush into

things. There was a lot of time spent listening to various Vietnamese. Diem in particular was a--going to interview Diem, which I did often, or his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu or his sister-in-law, Madame Nhu was always a really daunting experience, because they would talk for hours and hours and hours.

I began to develop a notion about Asia that nothing was ever very clear-cut, that attitudes were much more important than facts, if you could find facts, which was--statistics and things of that sort just didn't exist. So in a way I guess that I began to acquire that kind of metabolism of being patient, without feeling that I was necessarily getting to the core of anything. Sometimes it was like peeling an onion; every time you take a layer off, you'd have another layer underneath, and you kept going and sometimes there was nothing at the end. But I think those are knacks that are necessary to develop and acquire, and maybe one of our big mistakes as Americans in that part of the world is that we try to pin things down to looking for facts and trying to rush things. I was always reminded of Kipling's remark, the tombstone epitaph, here lies the man who tried to hustle the East. So as I say, there were many sources that I developed and some of those--I remember my student friend from Paris by now was back, Ton That Thien. There were numbers of others.

There was a whole group of Saigon political figures who were somewhat in opposition to the Diem government. They were called the Caravelle group and they included people like Dr. [Phan Huy] Quat, who

later became a prime minister; Vu Van Thai, who was an economist trained in France who later became ambassador to the United States; Bui Diem, who is now living here in Washington, who had been a newspaper publisher and later became ambassador to the United States. And numbers of others.

I think that the one thing that we lacked at the time was any contact with the Viet Cong. It was just very difficult to see anybody on the communist side, although I ought to mention two names because I later discovered that they were really communist agents. One was a colonel in the South Vietnamese army called Pham Ngoc Thao, who at the time I met him in about 1961 or 1962 was a province chief in a province called Ben Tre, which was then called Kien Hoa--the name was changed. He had been in charge of intelligence for the Viet Minh, for the communists in the Delta area during the war against the French. He was a Catholic and his brother was a high official in Hanoi, and he had been induced to quit the communists, or so it seemed, and come over to the South Vietnamese side. His patron was Diem's older brother, the archbishop, Ngo Dinh Thuc. When I met Thao he was, as I say, a province chief and he struck me as extremely knowledgeable, very attractive, a very interesting guy who seemed, more than the other South Vietnamese officers I'd met, to be more sensitive to the kinds of things the communists were doing. Most of the other South Vietnamese officers were products of the French period. They had been either regular soldiers who were non-commissioned officers and in some cases actually officers

in the French colonial forces, and [in] their approach to the problems they were conventional, whereas Thao seemed to be much more flexible and understanding and so forth as a result of his experiences with the Viet Minh.

As I say, he was a very articulate man, extremely intelligent, and I got to know him very well. Rightly or wrongly, I introduced him to some of my colleagues and soon he became something of a celebrity. Particularly I remember Joe Alsop went down to see him and began to write about him as the great hope of South Vietnam. And of course we didn't know at the time that he was really a double agent, something I didn't actually discover until I returned to Vietnam in 1981. There were some Vietnamese who have said that they suspected that he was, but there doesn't seem to have been any evidence.

I think most of his story, most of what I know about him, is in my book [***Vietnam: A History***], and I won't repeat that, except that there were periods when he was actually--he was assigned to Washington to the South Vietnamese embassy, and he was in liaison with the CIA and he managed to keep up this cover pretty well. But he was finally killed--murdered actually--by one of President Thieu's people, after he had returned from the United States. I'm not sure I know why. One of the presumptions was that they suspected him of being a communist, but there is another presumption that they suspected him of being a CIA agent. In any case, they didn't like him. I'm told that the person who actually killed him is living in the States today, a Vietnamese.

The other person whose history is very murky was a colleague, a Vietnamese journalist, who sometimes worked for me and helped me out, by the name of Pham Xuan An, who at that time was the Reuters representative in Saigon and then some years later became actually the only Vietnamese who was on the staff of an American publication. He was a ***Time*** correspondent. Again, he was extremely knowledgeable and I saw him very often. And it was [not] until I returned to Vietnam in 1981 that I was told that he had been a Viet Cong agent all along. To my knowledge, nobody has seen him since the communists took over in 1975, that is, no Americans. And many of his friends, colleagues, have tried to see him. I tried myself, but he hasn't seen anybody.

G: Did they give you a reason why?

K: They don't. They say it's inconvenient. One communist official told me in 1981 that An simply didn't want to see anybody. Now whether that was from some kind of embarrassment or because of his position, I don't know, but in any case there have been many attempts not only by me, but other people, ***Time*** magazine correspondents who have gone back there, with no success. So the real story is still very cloudy.

G: Do you know who killed Pham Ngoc Thao?

K: The only name I've been given--I'm not sure of this--is someone called Lieu, L-I-E-U, who was kind of police director under Thieu and is now living in Texas. He might be in your own neighborhood. You might want to be careful. But that's all I know about it. One of the ironies is

that Thao's wife, who was a very attractive woman, is also living in Texas; I think she's living in San Antonio.

G: My old hometown.

K: Really? There was some concern when I published--before I mentioned it in my book I also did a newspaper column about Thao which aroused a certain amount of comment. That was one of those cases where I was a little bit concerned about what kind of reaction there might be against his wife, because there are a lot of Vietnamese refugees in this country who are very strongly anti-communist and it may have backfired against her. At any rate, it was one of those chances I had to take. But I have no idea what she's doing; I'm completely out of touch with her.

G: Your thesis on Thao first came out I think in ***Encounter***, didn't it?

K: No, it first came out in a newspaper column I wrote and then ***Encounter*** reprinted the piece.

G: I see.

K: Wrongly, I think. The purpose of the ***Encounter*** publication of the piece was, I think, to try to contend that we were victims of disinformation, because it was coupled with a longer article by Robert Elegant about the failures of the media in Vietnam. Incidentally, I disagree very strongly with his thesis, but I think that was part of the reason why they reprinted that piece, was to raise that, to which I suppose I can only say that if we were victims of disinformation from Thao, so was the CIA, the State Department and everybody else.

G: Have you had any feedback from CIA about Thao?

K: Yes, I raised it one day. After I got back, I mentioned it to Bill Colby and his comment was, well, he wasn't so surprised that I discovered that there were some communist agents. In fact, he said, what is surprising to him is that there were so few. Well, I don't know; I've heard various stories of that sort. Frank Snepp has other versions of that. So it's hard to tell. But Colby didn't seem to take it with any great surprise.

G: Do you remember when you broke that news to him?

K: In 1981 after I had gotten back from Vietnam. You know how Colby is; he's right. He puts a good face on things.

(Laughter)

I mean I wasn't--when I raised it with him, it was by no means intended to challenge him with anything. I just thought I'd tell him. Colby and I got [along]. I know Colby very well and I like him. We had no--we've had some disagreements about things, but anyway he probably had heard it from you by that stage. Anyway.

G: Let's see, you started covering Vietnam actively in 1959. Ambassador Durbrow I guess was there.

K: Yes, Durbrow was there. Durbrow was a very interesting man, in my opinion. I think he had a good grasp of the situation. He was terribly frustrated, I think, in his attempts to get his point of view across to Diem, to influence Diem. He was up against a very tough customer, in Diem. Incidentally, I want to say that he also had a CIA station chief at the time who was extremely knowledgeable and I thought very, very

good, very open-minded and flexible, and that was a guy called Nick Natsios. Do you know his name?

G: Is he still alive?

K: Yes, he is. He's retired; he lives up in Worchester, Massachusetts. And Nick was, I thought, a very, very skillful guy.

I think one of the reasons--on the other hand, Durbrow had terrible problems with the American military advisory commander there, "Hanging Sam" [Samuel T.] Williams, as he was called. I don't know whether you have ever run into him. They had a lot of difficulties and differences over training of the Vietnamese, and Durbrow's attempt to get Diem to reform, and Durbrow's attempts to get Diem to take a much more flexible political position. On the other hand, Sam Williams saw things in the conventional military sense. I think Durbrow was, as I said, very sensitive and very well informed and very much aware of the dangers, not so much from the communist side, but that Diem was going to get overthrown by his own dissidents, his own supporters, or former supporters. Many of his fears were realized on November 11, 1960 when some of the South Vietnamese army units staged a revolt against Diem and besieged him in his palace and nearly overthrew him, and might have, except that Diem was clever and managed to wriggle out of it and some other units came to his support.

One of the reasons that I think that, as far as I was concerned, why people like Durbrow and his staff were much more open with the news media was; a) there weren't many reporters there at the time; but b) I

think we had not got ourselves locked into a policy with Vietnam the way we did later, when we took the position [that] if we didn't say anything critical about--that is, the American officialdom felt that if it didn't say anything critical about Diem, then those problems wouldn't exist. And it was an attempt to cover up a lot of the problems. I'm not saying that they weren't aware of the problems. We certainly know that now from all the confidential documents that have come out, that there was an awareness of the difficulties, but the attempt--once Durbrow was removed, presumably because he didn't get along with Diem, and Fritz [Frederick] Nolting came in as ambassador and his instructions were to get along with Diem, and then began what you might sort of vulgarly call a kind of coverup. We weren't going to say anything bad about Diem, and that became the sink-or-swim-with-Diem policy. At any rate, if you--I don't know. Have you talked to Durbrow? I think Durbrow is somewhat revisionist about everything, because when you look at what he said then, and I have my notes from that period and also the documents, and today in retrospect, I think he's--we interviewed him for our television series--I think he's sort of rewritten history. He's not as candid about all those things today as he was then.

G: It's over twenty years. Maybe he remembers it a little differently.

K: It's normal that people should do that. At any rate--

G: Tell me about Hanging Sam Williams.

K: I don't know a lot about him. I used to--he was kind of a--I mean, I used to see him occasionally and he was an irascible, leathery old officer. You know why he's called Hanging Sam, of course.

G: I know several stories; I don't know which one to believe.

K: The one story is that he was the warden at the Nuremberg prison and presided over the hanging of the Nazi criminals, and presumably was demoted or shelved or something because he let Göring commit suicide. Anyway, that's just--I don't know whether that's true or mythology.

G: He told me that he had that name long before he went to Nuremberg.

K: How did he get it?

(Interruption)

K: I think to talk about relations with Sam Williams, I think there was a kind of--I mean, this touches on a more general notion about attitudes of reporters which may or may not have been healthy. If you go back to those days, there wasn't any dissension in the press corps over the commitment to Vietnam. I mean, there were no doves, and there weren't, I would say, for a long time, until a long time later.

The differences that developed between the press corps and the establishment were not over whether we should be in Vietnam, but the way the war was being conducted. And Williams came in for a share of criticism because there were a lot of reporters who felt, with or without any real expertise behind it, that this was an insurgency that ought to be fought with counterinsurgency methods. And I should add, a very important element in this is that the reporters really in many ways

were often influenced by the kinds of anecdotes or stories that they got from low-level American advisers, who were terribly frustrated by the conventional approach. That, of course, was going to take on much more amplitude in the Kennedy Administration when counterinsurgency became very popular and stylish. But there were a good many officers at the lower level--in those days they were advisers--who were terribly frustrated by their inability to deal with the South Vietnamese army, with its structure, with its leaders, and also dealing with the difficulties of their own command, which tended to be very conventional and old-fashioned. And a lot of these younger army officers, Americans, thought that they were really with it. John Paul Vann of course was the best known of these people, these dissenters, if you want, and of course the encyclopedia on that is Neil Sheehan, who is writing a book on him.

So that I think was, to a large extent, the source of some of the tension that developed between the press and General Williams. Of course he had this kind of brusque manner; he wasn't a public relations man, and [on] the occasions when we went in and started challenging him with tough questions, he would fly off the handle and tell us we had no right to ask these questions. In retrospect, it was kind of funny and colorful, but as you know, there were real difficulties between him and Durbrow which came out in congressional hearings over the question of who was really in charge. And Williams refused in many cases to recognize Durbrow's authority.

G: Did you know Homer Bigart in those days?

K: Yes, sure. Have you seen Homer?

G: No.

K: Homer came out there on a temporary assignment and I don't know how long he stayed out there; it was a matter of months, I think. And of course he came with a great reputation and was very amusing, and I think sort of got to the heart of a lot of things pretty quickly. I can't remember very much more about him except--

(Interruption)

I mean, Homer--I don't know--then you get into sort of war stories; you start telling anecdotes about people. But he was a very amusing guy, very skeptical of what was going on, and refreshing. He was much older than we were and he was a very refreshing kind of guy to have around there.

I must say that I've got to add, there was another ***New York Times*** correspondent there who knew a lot more about Asia than--there were a couple more who knew a lot more about Asia than Homer, did and who were in and out of there and had been in and out of there for years. One guy was Robert Trumbull, who is now at the age of seventy-one retired officially, but still on assignment for the ***New York Times***, and he's at the moment in Manila. I think he was probably the last American journalist to interview Ho Chi Minh, in 1946. And he was in and out of there; he based in Hong Kong. And also in and out about that time, but I'm not sure of the dates, was Tillman Durdin, who had also been out

there for a long, long time. But I can't remember when Homer came in. I think he must have come in about 1962.

G: He would have left in that year because that was the year that Halberstam replaced him, I think.

K: Yes, but he was only there temporarily, because Halberstam came out and actually opened the bureau and was there permanently. I know Homer was there in the beginning of 1962 because there was a very funny incident. I had to go down to Saigon. I was taking the managing editor of *Time* magazine around Asia, a guy called Roy Alexander, who was a very nice guy but really didn't know anything about the area, and like a lot of editors, particularly *Time* editors, [was] kind of easily swayed by meetings with high officials. He came in there; Nolting was then the ambassador--and this was in February, 1962--Nolting invited him to dinner but did not invite me along, because press relations with Nolting were not very good. And Alexander had an interview with Diem, alone again. And I remember his coming back to the Caravelle Hotel, where we were staying, from the dinner he had with Nolting. What there was of the press corps in those days used to hang around in the bar up there, and Alexander came in for a nightcap, which with him consisted of about six drinks, and started telling us that he thought we were all wrong about our criticism, that we should get on the team, to use a phrase of the time, and so forth. And that he was assured by Nolting that Diem had great support and of course Diem himself repeated that, that everyone loved him and so forth.

At about six o'clock the next morning--I was sharing a suite with Alexander--we heard some kind of thuds outside, thudding noises, and we got up and looked out of the window and we could see a couple of airplanes flying over the city. Then we went up to the roof to get a better look at this. And I should add that Alexander had been a test pilot for Grumman, so he was on very familiar ground in watching this. We were watching two airplanes bomb the palace. I ran down and ran out to the palace to get up closer and so forth, finally got back to the hotel, and Alexander was there with other reporters and he began to say, well, maybe he was a little hasty the night before about how everyone loved Diem. And Homer Bigart, to come back to the beginning of the story, took me aside, and you know he stuttered, which added to--I sometimes almost thought that he stuttered deliberately for his timing of his lines. He said to me, "You son of a bitch, Karnow, you probably organized that bombing."

(Laughter)

G: You have to admit the timing was pretty good.

K: The timing was very good.

So my editor went back, having agreed that the reporters weren't as bad as he was told they were.

G: That's a good story.

K: Anyway, that's about all I can tell you about Homer. You'd have to look at his stories and--

G: Was there a press policy in existence in those days?

K: We're now moving into the Nolting period. I don't know whether it was actually in writing or not but certainly Nolting was not very--Nolting was very, very tight-lipped. I think, looking back on it, he had a tough assignment. I think that as the situation began to degenerate and you began to get things like this bombing attack against Diem, and you've got the battle of Ap Bac in the beginning of 1963, and the differences that came out over that, and then the Buddhist crisis that began to develop in 1963; the fact was that the government in Saigon was getting a very bad press. The government in Saigon didn't know how to handle the press and Nolting was trying to get the newsmen to put a good face on it, but he didn't know how to do it.

I think that he didn't have the flexibility; he wasn't a politician, so his approach to the situation, to dealing with it, was to assume that if he didn't talk to anybody, except of course the people that he thought would agree with him, then he wouldn't have problems with them. But just the reverse occurred. The press is not hard to manipulate, but he really very much froze out the newsmen. It seemed to me he was very uncomfortable with reporters, which I am told was a big difference from what he had been when he served in Europe, because colleagues of mine who knew him when he was at NATO liked him very much and thought he was a rather easy guy to get along with. But in that Saigon situation--I suppose to be compassionate towards him--I think that he really had his hands full.

I want to go back and make a point about something, which I thought I had overlooked and I think is very important. I'm trying to think back on the dates now--it must be around--see, in the very beginning, in late 1960 and early 1961, or until then, there was a refusal on the part of the Diem government to admit that anything was going wrong in the country in terms of the communist insurgency. And I think there was, looking back on it, a reluctance to admit that anybody was challenging his authority. I mean if you look at it from an Asian point of view, if you admit that there is opposition, either among your own, internally, or coming from communist insurgents, in a sense it is a kind of loss of face, that people don't like you. And Diem considered himself to be a mandarin and operating with the mandate of heaven, that everyone obeyed him and so forth, and he just didn't want to admit that there were any problems. And so it was very hard to get information out of the government, especially in terms of what was happening in the countryside, because I think in part they didn't know a lot of what was happening in the countryside, but also they didn't want to admit to it.

And when the decision was made, I guess it would have been after Kennedy came into office, that we were going to put Vietnam on the map, then it flipped to the other side and a real public relations operation began. This incidentally is about the time that the term "Viet Cong" was invented; that was invented by the South Vietnamese government. I think one of the people who had a hand in it was a Vietnamese called Dong Duc Khoi, a marvelous guy,

a really bright guy who is unfortunately dead now. He just lived here in this neighborhood, in Potomac.

The next thing you know they began to rev up a lot of publicity about the problem; they began to let correspondents ride on helicopters, which had been--that was later; helicopters weren't introduced until--well, they were introduced in early 1962, after the Taylor mission. And they actually set up a public--they had a public relations adviser by the name of George Ortiz, who came out there. I think if you go back and examine it, and I'm not sure about this; I have it in my notes somewhere, I think they actually hired a public relations firm in New York of which he was a representative, and this was going to put the insurgency on the map. And suddenly everyone became very cooperative, that is all these Americans that came out there. Ortiz ran this thing. And the South Vietnamese, some of them anyway, tried their best to sort of play this game. But it didn't last very long, because your public relations can't be any better than your policy. You could put out a lot of press releases and things about how everything is going so well, but if it's not, then you're not going to fool anybody. And the point I've got to stress again is that we all had sources. We all had sources, either in the American military advisers or Vietnamese political figures, some of them in opposition, some of them in the government. When they had their complaints to make, sometimes they figured the best way to do it was to do an end run and go to the American press, get it

in the American papers; a) so it could get back to Washington; and b) so it would sort of rebound, ricochet back to Saigon.

I see you've got a question here about whether I ever had a story killed for political reasons. It's sort of jumping ahead, but I'll tell you one that I remember. I had amassed a good deal of information about the internal dissension, the internal opposition to Diem--not the communists, but a lot of his own people--before and then just after the coup took place against Diem in November of 1960. And I wrote a long thing for ***Time*** magazine about it, and they didn't use that story. I remember I had left Saigon and wrote it in the Philippines, because of the difficulties of getting stories out just for mechanical reasons, also censorship--not censorship but post-censorship.

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They didn't use that story, and I suspect one of the reasons they didn't use it was that ***Time*** magazine was beginning to get vibrations from Washington about the importance of Vietnam, and they were beginning--prior to that, they had pretty much run stories that were critical, and did afterwards, too, from time to time. But gradually in the latter days, the last days of the Eisenhower Administration and the first days of the Kennedy Administration, they began to get on the team. That was something the ***Time*** people did, the ***Time*** editors did.

Anyway, I was a little bit frustrated by having a very detailed piece without any market for it, so I sent it to the ***Reporter*** magazine, which then existed, and they ran it as a major story. Okay, the ***Time***

editors got angry about that, but that's beside the point. The interesting thing was that it made its way back to Saigon. Again, this is in early 1961 at a time when not much was being written about Vietnam. And here I was with this ***Reporter*** piece which--people were carrying it around; they didn't have Xerox machines in those days either, incidentally, so you'd see tattered copies, people passing that sort of thing around.

So there was a real hunger in Saigon among the Vietnamese elites, the doctors and lawyers and so forth, for material coming from the States, for access to American reporters, and some of it got to be pretty tedious. I mean, they'd sit up at great length talking about how the United States had to help them get the kind of democracy or freedom or whatever, and more flexible government than--and of course each one of those guys was a politician or a candidate for some public job himself. Of course later when some of them got into office they didn't really do very well themselves.

At any rate, maybe at a risk of repeating myself, it was very interesting. I liked that kind of--that atmosphere; I liked that Asian atmosphere. You spend your time talking to lots and lots and lots of people and accumulating a tremendous amount of material, a lot of it contradictory, a lot of it phony. There was never a lack of information in Vietnam. The main question was how you interpreted what you had and how you separated the fact from the fancy, if there was any fact. And as I said, the important thing from a political point of view was and

is, and it's true I think in other parts of Asia, [it's] not what was true that was important; it was what people thought was true that was important. Because if rumors swirled around and people believed them, that had just as much political impact as if the stories were actually credible.

G: Do you know Ed Lansdale?

K: Yes. Ed Lansdale was a master at promoting rumors, because he understood this. My own opinion of Lansdale [is] he was in many ways very naive, because he thought that was the whole game, when in fact that was only a little part of it.

G: Did you see him when he went out there, I guess it was in early 1961?

K: Let's see, I must have seen him. I saw him later when he came back in 1965, when he set up a mission there. And I've seen him around here.

G: Yes, he lives in McLean.

K: Yes, we interviewed him. I spent a lot of time with him over the years.

G: The reason I ask you that is because that is almost a direct quote of something that he said.

K: Really?

G: He said there are no secrets in Asia, only the need to determine which story is true.

K: Since he put out a lot of phony stories, he--

(Laughter)

The important thing was to know what impact--listen, I may be getting ahead, getting too much--

G: There's nothing sacrosanct about this list of questions.

K: Yes, yes--no, no, that's fine. The next few I guess are not too hard to deal with.

I wrote the book as a companion to the television series because, while I thought that television had its limitations--I'm a writer, I'm not a film maker, but as we began to get going in the television series, which took us a long, long time to do, I began to realize at the very beginning that while you could do tremendous things on a screen, and also you can convey a lot of drama on a screen that you cannot convey in a book, there's a lot of analysis and complexity that you can't get on a screen. The television is a medium of impressions, of drama, but it's not a medium of information. It's very hard to deal with very complicated situations on television. So it seemed to me that it was necessary to do a book as a companion, and the book is not merely a replica of the television series; it's not the script, it's a completely separate book. The television thing was a group project; the book is my own. But they seemed like natural companions to one another. And I suppose if I were doing the book again, the main thing I would do is get a word processor so I could do it faster.

(Laughter)

I think it came out pretty well.

G: Let me ask you a question about the TV program. How much of the film that was taken was not used, that was useable but had to be cut for reasons of economy and so on?

K: Generally, by just a rule of thumb you're operating on about a ratio of about one to ten, or one to fifteen. For every foot of film that you use, you throw away nine or fourteen feet. In some cases, we had to dispense with interviews because they didn't work out well. We could have an interview that I could use in the book but just didn't work out on the film. Sometimes it just didn't lend itself to the making of the film. Sometimes the interviews, especially with older people, didn't turn out to be terribly intelligible. We spent a lot of time interviewing Averell Harriman, for example, and it really wasn't terribly good. Some of Lansdale was good; some of it wasn't. Durbrow, for example, I don't think we used any of Durbrow. But we did a lot of interviews that we ended up--

G: Let me ask you about a couple of those. Robinson Risner, for example, the POW.

K: Yes, I didn't do that one, someone else did it, but yes, I know about it. I thought it was a good interview.

G: He's in Austin.

K: Yes.

G: Lou Conein. Did you do that one?

K: I did that, yes. Conein's a friend of mine, a good friend.

G: Is he?

K: Yes. Have you talked to him?

G: Yes. Let me ask you a question. He told me that he had told the true story of the Diem coup twice, first to you and next to me.

K: Let me just say about Conein that--I mean, maybe you don't want this; this is just sort of mechanical.

Many years ago I thought that Conein would make an interesting book. He's got an incredible career behind him. So I spent about seventy hours interviewing him. This was all before this Vietnam thing. We had known each other in Vietnam for a long time. And I did a tremendous amount of research on that, not only interviewing him, but then I had to cross-check a lot of what he told me, and a lot of what he says is very exaggerated and a lot of it is not even true at all. I sometimes wonder whether he has told some of these stories so many times that he thinks they're true. But anyway, so I had to go and interview all sorts of people who knew him, his ex-wives among them [Hmong women?], and so forth. And in the end I never did it; I didn't do a book out of it. But I had a lot of material and so I used a lot of it in my book. I like Conein; we get along very well and I think he's a very funny guy.

The coup story: he gave me a lot of the coup story; there's a lot of other stuff on the coup, particularly a long account I think that appeared as a series in a Vietnamese newspaper that was pretty much inspired by Tran Van Don, the general who was the liaison guy with Conein. That was translated into English by an American by the name of Nach, Jim Nach, who is now serving in Manila. I got a copy of it and then I asked Conein to annotate it for me, to tell me what he thought about it, and he did, which was quite useful. I may be a little pissed

off that he made a lot of copies and started handing [them] around to people, because I thought I had an inside track on that story. But at any rate, he was very, very useful. That's jumping ahead to this question, about--he was a big source for me on the coup, even when it was happening. But I'll come back to that later. I spent a lot of time on that story.

G: Okay. What's been the general reaction to the book?

K: It's been really amazing. I mean, it's just something I was unprepared for. When we started thinking about doing a television series, which was in the summer of 1977, [when] the idea was first floated to me. I thought it was a good idea because I was interested in the story, but when the executive producer, Richard Ellison, and I started thinking about that, nobody seemed to be interested in the subject. And we had great trouble getting money for our series, because of this lack of interest and because I guess in the eyes of a lot of corporations that normally give money for public television, it was also a controversial subject that they didn't want to touch. But then it came out. It's gotten the highest ratings that any documentary on PBS has ever gotten. The book to date has sold two hundred thousand copies, was on the ***New York Times*** best seller list for eighteen weeks, and it's going into paperback in June--

G: Great.

K: --with 150,000, first printing. The television series is being re-played. I've done a lot of traveling around the country; I did about

twenty-one cities last fall promoting the book and the television series, and there's tremendous interest. Since then, I've been going around doing a lot of lectures in universities and I find to my surprise that there's a tremendous interest. Especially what's surprising is to find the interest on the part of kids who were not even born when a lot of this was happening.

G: Maybe that's why they're interested; they don't have a position.

K: I think a lot of the interest has revived because of Central America and the general Vietnam metaphor that's floating around. You know, are we going to get involved in other Vietnams in some other places?

G: Are you asked that question very much?

K: Yes.

G: What do you tell them?

K: I tell you, these are the three questions that come out all the time, over and over again. They start off, how do we get involved in Vietnam? What went wrong? And the third one is, how to avoid this sort of thing in the future? And those are the three things on people's minds, of all ages.

I see similarities, but I see differences, too. Central America is not Southeast Asia, and the situations on the ground are very different. I just think that I see similarities in the way that the administration tends to want to fit the problems into the context of our problems of our confrontation with the Soviet Union. As if to say there wouldn't have been any turbulence in Central America if it hadn't been

for the Russians and the Cubans, and if they weren't there, the situation would still be--I mean, you've got revolutionary conditions in these places that would exist if the Russians and Cubans weren't there. That's not to deny they're involved, but I think they're targets of opportunity for them rather than the cause of them. And I think the second similarity is the military approach, which is what we did in Vietnam, too, ignoring alternatives. And maybe the third one is that it's very hard to imagine in Central America, as it was eventually in the later stage of Vietnam, that we're going to get a favorable conclusion to that thing. I mean again, when you read the official statements and now it says it seems as if someday all these guerrillas are all going to all melt away and everything is going to become nice and rosy again, and it's just not going to happen that way.

So anyway, I think that has had a lot to do with arousing interest. I think also a very important element was that with the passage of time and the kind of attenuation of the passions of the war, that people are prepared to take another look at it, less emotionally.

And part of that I think is that the plight of the veterans has finally gotten through, not that I think that all veterans have got problems, but a large proportion of them do. The veterans' memorial, I think, had a lot to do with that. This is kind of new respectability about veterans. People used to blame the veterans, used to blame the GIs from one extreme or the other. If they were left-wing, they blamed

them for killing kids in Vietnam. If they were right-wing, they blamed them for losing the war. I think that's passed.

Where I do think we still get--we've gotten some criticism of the television series and my book, and it's been very, very small; it predictably came from a lot of Vietnamese refugees who didn't think that for one reason or another we were kind enough to them or we didn't take an anti-communist enough position for them. But that's by no means universal. I have a lot of Vietnamese friends here who are not critical at all. I mean, they may have some small complaints but generally speaking--Bui Diem, for example, the former ambassador, disassociates himself completely from a lot of these Vietnamese refugees. I know there's a big group in Houston that's mounting some kind of a counter-television program against us.

The other, sort of stronger criticism, I think, has come from the extremes of either the right or the left, strangely enough, with the leftist extremes being more critical than the rightist extremes, although complaint from a lot of the residual left-wing anti-war-movement types that the series was not passionate enough; we didn't call Lyndon Johnson a war criminal or that sort of thing, that we didn't take sides, which we deliberately tried to avoid. And that's been matched to some extent by the criticism coming from the right wing, from very-right wing people like--they have publications like ***Human Events*** and things like that; I mean the radical right wing. I mean, the fact that we went

to Vietnam and interviewed communists in itself has kind of contaminated us, so--but I would say that's a very, very small proportion in the mix.

G: Let me ask you about one of your Vietnamese interviews. For some reason I was very impressed with one of the North Vietnamese. He's identified as a colonel; I can't remember his name. He was wearing a cap.

K: Bui Tinh.

G: Was that Bui Tinh? Very impressive.

K: Yes, he was very, very good. I found him by some chance. He's not a very high-ranking guy, but he was very articulate and a very good interview.

G: An impressive-looking guy. Kind of burly for a--

K: Yes, he is sort of a burly type. I think you could spend a lot of time with him. Not only did I do an interview on the camera, because there were limits to what you could do since you had a limited amount of film, but I spent a lot of time with him, taping him on a tape recorder. And if you wanted, you could actually do a whole story of the communist side of the war just in terms of his own experience. He was very interesting.

G: Do you want to go back to the Diem coup? I think that's where--

K: Yes; now, let's see, "What were the best sources of the story on the Diem coup?" Well--

(Interruption)

Let me just go back a moment in the story of the coup. A very key guy in South Vietnam throughout the Diem period was Diem's secret police

chief. He was a man called Tran Kim Tuyen. And he was a very odd little guy; he was tiny, he was less than five feet high, and he spoke in a very squeaky voice. My understanding was that he was both the chief of some kind of a secret police organization that wasn't actually police, but a secret internal intelligence organization, and also an external intelligence organization keeping track very much of Vietnamese living abroad. And both these operations had been set up with the help of the CIA.

Early in 1961, not long after the first abortive coup against Diem, the paratroopers' coup of November 1960, I was introduced to him by one of his people, one of the guys that worked for him, a guy I mentioned earlier, Dong Duc Khoi. It was a little bit surprising to me that he decided to surface at that time. To my knowledge, as I said earlier, there weren't many reporters in Saigon and, secondly, I guess for one reason or another, he picked me to meet. But anyway, he was at that stage beginning to get concerned about the future of the Diem government. He was beginning to get worried that the Diem regime, partly because of Diem himself but also very much because of Diem's brother Nhu and Madame Nhu, was going to alienate a large part of the population and, as a result, play into the hands of the communists. Tuyen, who was a Catholic from the North who had come down in 1954--his name was Tony. We called him Tony; he had a Christian name. [He] was very perceptive and a guy who was beginning to get very concerned that unless the government straightened out, the communists would take over

and of course he would be very much--he would be particularly vulnerable. His CIA guy, by the way, the guy who was his chief CIA adviser, was a guy called Phil Potter, who is now dead. [He] retired from the CIA, went back to Vietnam to try to make money there, and I don't know what happened to him. I knew Potter because Potter was a friend of my wife's from the time that she was in Vietnam. So I can remember quite vividly that he came to lunch with me and began to sort of let on that he was not happy with the way things were going. Then I used to see him quite a bit. By the time we got to the middle of 1963 he was one of the various groups that were starting to plot against the Diem regime. And the important thing to remember is that there wasn't one group at the beginning. My colleague, [Robert] Shaplen, who has written some stuff about the coup, claims that this guy Tuyen was the key guy in the whole thing. That's nonsense. He was just one of the people. Thao was another one. And I've described in my book the various different currents that were operating. So I mention him only in one respect because he was one of the guys.

But I'll just continue, because there was an interesting little story; I'll just play out this story. By now, by about I would say about September of 1963, the regime, especially Nhu, realized that Tuyen, who had been working for him, had turned against him, which was of course par for the course in Vietnam where everybody was double-crossing everybody else anyway, and they decided to get him out of the country.

So they appointed him to be South Vietnamese consul in Cairo, but he never went there. He left the country, went to Bangkok, and then from Bangkok he flew to Hong Kong. And he called me up when he got to Hong Kong and said, "Here I am in Hong Kong." He was really lost in a place like Hong Kong. He didn't speak any English and he didn't speak any Chinese. He moved into a little hotel and just used to sit around all day reading books or something like that.

There were a lot of Chinese who used to come to see him because they were related to Chinese living in Saigon, and I guess there were a lot of pay-offs his organization got from the Chinese and so forth. At any rate, so he then was kind of in this exile in Hong Kong. I was shuttling back and forth to Saigon, so he started asking me to take letters and things back to Saigon, which was useful for me. I didn't want to get involved in the thing, but at the same time if I carried some letters somewhere I knew I was dealing with one of his confederates, which was useful for me and it helped me to meet a lot of these guys.

So as I say, that was one, and just to finish the story, when the coup took place on November 1, I wasn't in Saigon at that very moment; I was in Hong Kong, but I managed to--and he knew it was going on because he sat in his hotel room listening to the radio. So I took him back--I decided to go back to Saigon, I mean I decided to rush down there as quickly as I could, and I took him along with me. He decided that since he'd been in the plot, now it had been successful and he was going to go

back. So we flew back together, in sort of a complicated way. We had to take a long way around because the airport was closed. Anyway, when we got back there and we landed, and he went back to his house to see his wife who was still there, and he hadn't seen her in a couple of months. I came around the next day to see him and I was sitting in his living room with him with a--I had taken another colleague along, Takashi Oka, who is a ***Christian Science Monitor*** guy in Peking now. We were sitting there talking with him, and some South Vietnamese army officer came in and said something to him in Vietnamese which I did not understand. And he said, "General So-and-so wants to see me, so let's resume this talk tomorrow," or tonight or something. And off he went. They took him to jail.

(Laughter)

I guess things had changed so rapidly that he was a target of somebody. And he was in and out of jail, but he survived it somehow and he was out again, but with no job in the government. Nobody trusted him. I talked to him on the phone not long ago; he's living in Cambridge, England, running a boarding house for Vietnamese students. And I think his wife was dying the last time I talked to him. At any rate, he's just one figure, but he was kind of useful and it led me to a lot of other things.

Of course Conein was useful, but then Conein was not divulging a lot of the things that were going on, nor was Lodge. Actually, at the time that the conspiracy was going on, we were only getting little hints

of it. Thao again was another good source at that time, and again a case where--at that stage I had known him a couple of years, and he had his own coup group, too. In fact, he had his coup group; Tuyen had his, they blended, and then they joined some general and that general joined other generals. It was like a lot of little streams feeding into a river. And I saw a good deal of him. The big problem I had was I was then working for the ***Saturday Evening Post***, and I couldn't--I was also working for the ***London Observer***, so that gave me a sort of weekly outlet, but the ***Saturday Evening Post*** wanted long pieces. And one of the things I had to do was to put together the whole story of the coup just after it happened. So that's what I did. When I went back there [I] started going around seeing as many people as I could, to piece it together, which wasn't easy to do. I think, looking back on it, it pretty well stood up. Then one of the things I was able to do was when I got all my notes together--which were a massive number of notes, given to volubility of the Vietnamese. I mean, everybody talks a blue streak. And I really had to go around and see commanders of different military units and try to figure out who was doing what at each time. And I ended up with a massive amount of information which had to be boiled down to about five or six thousand words. But when I had all my notes, I had a friend in the CIA, so I sat down with him and I tried to check them against what they knew about this thing. So they made some corrections, although I don't think that they knew a lot, because the only guy

in the station who was then operating on the thing was Conein, and the others were frozen out of it.

G: Who was chief of station then?

K: It had varied. A guy called [John] Richardson had been there and they removed him. I'm not sure who was then the chief of station.

G: Was it David Smith?

K: Could have been. But I mean whoever he was, the only Americans who were really involved were Lodge and Conein, to my knowledge. Oh, there was one other guy. They had a couple of other guys at the early stage, but the real liaison, to my knowledge, with the generals themselves, with Tran Van Don, was Conein. That was the only channel, and as far as I know Conein reported directly to Lodge. There may have been some clerks or something that sent messages back, but I don't know how much the rest of the CIA people knew about it. Lodge incidentally, I want to say, to the extent that he was telling anybody anything was also very open with the press. I mean, when Lodge arrived, politician that he was, it changed the whole complexion of the relations between the embassy and the news media. The first thing he did when he got off the airplane was to have a press conference at the airport, and from then on he was very accessible. Never had any problems.

G: Would you say he courted the press?

K: Yes, of course, yes. Again, being a politician, he realized that he could get his messages back to Washington much more quickly and get them back to the United States much more quickly by talking to newsmen. And

while you weren't getting from him in those days any--he wasn't giving people day-by-day reports on the conspiracy, even to the extent that he knew it, because there was a lot that wasn't known even to him. The inner workings of all the Vietnamese factions were beyond him or anybody else. But what he was very good at was conveying his attitudes, and it was very clear from the moment he got in there that he was determined to see this coup take place. I don't think he anticipated that Diem would be killed, but he--and of course there was a lot of duplicity in his position, too. I think he tried to minimize the role that he himself played in the coup. I mean, he kept saying it's basically there, but we now find the confidential cables which made it clear that he was the one, he felt that he was the one, who planted the seed. And I'm convinced now that of course it would never have taken place if he had tried to discourage the generals involved. They wanted to be absolutely sure that they were going to get American support afterwards, and I think that if they hadn't, if there had been any reluctance to give them that guarantee, I think they would have been much more cautious about doing it.

G: How did you react personally to the news of the coup? Did you think this was a step in the right direction?

K: Yes.

G: Not necessarily the assassinations, but the coup itself.

K: Yes. No, the assassinations were a bit of a shock. I mean, no one expected that. But then again, you get back to what was the prevailing

mood, I think, in the American press, and I don't think mine was much different, which was that the feeling was--I did a piece for the ***Saturday Evening Post***, I think it was about the fall of 1963, and the headline, which I didn't write, but the title of the piece was, "We Can't Win the War with Diem." And that was generally, I think, the prevailing view of the news media, that our presence, our commitment to Vietnam was valid but that we had this client government there that just was incapable of dealing with the situation and you had to remove it, and if we couldn't exert pressure on them to reform, which was by that time clear that we were unable to, then we had to do something to get them out of the way and get in people who were more effective. And that was I think in many ways a very naive attitude. But it was not only an attitude of the news media; it was an attitude that was shared by Lodge and everybody else. I mean, Lodge's final comment after the coup was, as I think I quoted in my book, "Well now, this will shorten the war." We interviewed Madame Nhu on our television series--oh, just before I say that, I want to say when we interviewed Roger Hilsman on our television series, he said, "Well, it was Diem's own fault, because he didn't do what we told him to do." And she comes on afterwards, we interviewed her, and she in retrospect looks pretty good in saying, "It was all arrogance. Who were these Americans that came here and could tell us how to run things?" Not that she was doing much of a job; she was alienating a lot of people at the time.

One can go back and speculate on what might have happened. I think that one of the interesting things that comes out afterwards is the possibility that Diem and Nhu might have made a deal with the North; I think there's a distinct possibility there that if he hadn't been overthrown he might have done that. But then that's just speculation.

G: It's pretty well established that Nhu was in contact with the other side.

K: Yes, we know that, sure. In fact, the guy who was the intermediary is a former Polish diplomat who lives in Queens, by the name of [Mieczyslaw] Maneli. And I've interviewed him on many occasions. The French were involved in that, too; the French ambassador was involved in setting up these contacts. There was a Vietnamese by the name of Buu Hoi, who was in Paris. He's dead now. He was a scientist at the Pasteur Institute in Paris who was very close to General de Gaulle, and was advocating this. I had known him in Paris. At any rate, there was that possibility. I've described some of that in the book. Anyway, it was a very exciting period and--

G: Do you think there is anything we don't know about the coup that's going to change our view?

K: There may be a few little things. I interviewed the communists on the issue of whether there were contacts with the South and they said yes, there were, but it was a very exploratory stage. I don't think they had gotten very far.

G: Was the National Liberation Front surprised by the coup? Were they taken unaware?

K: Yes, I think the communists were really taken aback by the coup and probably made the mistake of not moving quickly enough, especially--one of the things that happened in the couple of months after the coup is that the junta that took over, Big Minh and all those guys, who were really incapable of doing anything, but one of the first things they did was to remove all the Diem officials and people in the army who had been loyal to Diem. So you had a vacuum that existed, and I don't think the Viet Cong moved quickly enough. I've read some communist documents subsequent to the war; looking back, they've published their own history of the war in which they make the point that there were occasions, like the whole turbulence of the Buddhists and so forth, where they failed to get involved in it, and later too, in later periods when there was a widespread Buddhist opposition to the later government [of] Thieu and Ky, that they really didn't take advantage of. And I have tried to explore that a little bit. I think one of the problems was they are very rigid politically. They didn't trust groups that they didn't control. And I think that's evident today. One of the big Buddhist leaders in 1963 and then later in 1966 and 1967 was Tri Quang, the monk who was a very shrewd political organizer. At the time that he was stirring up Buddhists, a lot of people were saying that he was a communist agent. That's nonsense. He's in house arrest in Vietnam

today. I think the communists distrusted people like him because they didn't control them and they were very inflexible about dealing with--

G: But if Pham Ngoc Thao was inside both the coup group and the National Liberation Front, surely they must have had advance warning that it was coming?

K: Yes, I think they probably knew it was coming, but my feeling is that they probably--I don't think they were surprised that it was coming as much as they were by what happened afterwards. I think, given their rigidity, they didn't know how to react to it and adapt to it quickly. There is a thesis that's been put out by George Kahin of Cornell; he claims that after the generals overthrew Diem, that they were moving toward some kind of an accommodation with Hanoi and it was for that reason that the United States encouraged their overthrow at the end of January. But he sent me the papers that he's written on it. There's nothing in it; there's no hard evidence to substantiate that. I don't think the generals who took over were any less anti-communist than Diem had been.

G: [Nguyen] Khanh did make that charge, though, didn't he, that there were "neutralists" in the--?

K: That's right. He put them on trial actually, but he couldn't get them convicted; there was no evidence.

G: Even in Vietnam, he couldn't get them--

K: Couldn't get them convicted. He sent them up to Dalat and put them under house arrest and so forth. So there was no real evidence that

they were doing that. I mean they had flimsy things, like one of the charges was that Tran Van Don was really a neutralist because he was born in France and had close French connections. I mean, there was no real substance to that. And Kahin, who I saw the other day, keeps sticking to his thesis, but I'd like to think maybe it's true, but I can't see any evidence for it. As far as I know, it's nonsense. I think he will just have to find some justification for it.

Tape 2 of 2, Side 1

G: We were winding up the coup story, I think.

K: Yes, pretty much. I think that--let's just have a look here. I want to make a reference to what Bui Tin told me. What I learned from the communist side about the aftermath of the coup and the situation in 1964 was that after they kind of recovered from, you might say, their inability to move quickly enough to take advantage of that vacuum that had been created, they felt that they had to do something in the South. And I quoted Bui Tin, who is a colonel now, a communist colonel. He said, "We had to move from the guerrilla phase into the conventional war. Otherwise, our future would have been bleak." One of the things I recall his telling me [was] that they at that stage really didn't think the Viet Cong units were reliable. They had a kind of a northerner's attitude toward southerners. Pretty much, they sound like American advisers: "These guys really can't do anything." So they had to begin to think about moving northern forces down south, and although the Ho Chi Minh Trail had certainly existed for a long time, now they reached

the stage where they were going to start moving conventional forces down. They had to do something about it.

The first thing that he did was to go down with some sort of a mission to study the situation. But I think pretty much the decision to escalate the war was made at the Communist Party plenum that they had in December of 1963. And it's very often--it's not any different there than it is in Washington--you make your decision and then you do your investigation afterwards, which confirms your decision.

(Laughter)

So I think that--even though--I think you raised the point--that the Viet Cong maybe was operating--did I say that they were operating at division strength at Ap Bac? No.

G: No.

K: No, they weren't, no. But even though I think there was a certain degree of effectiveness of the VC, that the North Vietnamese began to feel that they wanted to start sending big units, and I presume they wanted to have more control over the situation in the South. One of the things that has come out since then is the extent to which there were differences between the northerners and southerners, even though they could all be communists. So it's now much more clear in retrospect that the North really wanted to control the South; they didn't want to leave the South in the hands of southern communists.

G: Who is running the South today?

K: Le Duc Tho is really very much in charge, very much responsible. His brother is the boss of Saigon. But it's still a collective leadership. But when you go back to Vietnam today, the thing that's surprising is to hear from all the old Viet Cong types that you meet that the place is crawling with northern carpetbaggers.

G: Is that their. . . ?

K: No, no, there's no word in French. They speak French, but there's no word for that. But it's a pretty liberal translation of all these--and there's really indeed a lot of animosity towards them. My press guide in Saigon when I was there, in Ho Chi Minh City--one day we were going to go out on a drive together and some northerner who happened to be hanging around, some northern official had nothing to do, and he invited himself along. Whereupon the southerner just sort of found something--decided he had another appointment, and I was stuck for the day with this grim northern official.

So anyway, I think that there's been a lot written about this whole decision to move units down to the South, but my general feeling is that this whole argument about "Did the northerners come down in response to our combat intervention, or vice versa?"--I think it's a fatuous argument. The Johnson Administration put out this thing called "Aggression from the North," which was a pretty lousy document, because most of the captured enemy troops that they identified were southerners who had come back from [the North], but just because they captured those guys didn't mean that there weren't northerners coming down, too. But

it seemed to me that it became one of the kind of fundamental dogmas of the antiwar movement, which is to claim that the northerners didn't come down South except as a response to the American intervention, which I think is baloney. And from the communist point of view it didn't make any difference anyway, because the communists considered that Vietnam was all one country and they had the right to be anywhere they wanted, even though they publicly kept denying that they had any troops in the South.

This thing about Abe Fortas, if you want to go on to it, unless you have any more questions on this one?

G: Sure, go ahead.

K: I've got to say that one of my gaps is that in the time I was covering the war I wasn't familiar enough with what was going on in Washington, since I was out there. And one of the interesting things about the Vietnam War was it was not just one war, it was lots of wars. If you just looked at the battlefield, there was a different kind of a war going on, if you were up in the Highlands or if you were in the Delta or if you were a pilot. And then there was a war going on in Washington, and there was a Saigon war, and so forth. There were lots of different things going on at the same time. So at the time it was unclear to me; the Washington end of it was a little bit murky to me, because I wasn't here. And that's one of the things that I had to do a lot of research about when I got back, when I started doing my book, was to go back and try to reconstruct a lot of what was going on in Washington.

But the influence of Abe Fortas, the first time I heard about that was on a visit back to Washington. I was having lunch--I will give you the name of the guy--with Tom Hughes, who was then the head of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, and a very shrewd guy who keeps his fingers on a lot of things, especially since then, but I presume he knew a lot. I'll mention this little test he gave me. He kept asking me who I thought was the most influential [adviser], and I was astounded when he mentioned Abe Fortas. I had heard of Abe Fortas but I didn't know anything about him. I would say that Clark Clifford was probably very influential, too. But I think that's probably--since Abe Fortas never wrote any memoirs--did he ever do an oral history?

G: Not with me.

K: But with anybody? I don't know.

G: I'm wracking my brain to see if he did, and I don't--

K: He certainly would have been one of the people who ought to have done one, since he was very close to Johnson.

Then of course subsequently when I did my research I did a little more on him, but I couldn't get a lot about him. But among the various things I learned was that Johnson used to call him every night and I gather, from a little bit of the history, that he was very crucial in getting Johnson into Congress. You probably know more about that than I do.

G: In any case their association goes back beyond that. They knew one another before that, certainly.

K: That's just a small passage in my book and it's really based on hearsay. I made a lot of research I never had a need for. Also this thing about the drug traffic; I didn't get into that in great length, but there is that book by Alfred McCoy called--

G: ***The Politics of Heroin [in Southeast Asia].***

K: Yes. And also then there were hearings. I think Lee Hamilton had hearings on it. I treated that a little gingerly; I don't know if I'm sure about that.

This whole question about the importance of the debate among journalists; they were all in Vietnam [?]. Yes, it's gone on. It comes up periodically, especially when you get into things like Elegant's piece in ***Encounter*** or Braestrup's book, ***Big Story***. And then you get this reaction against it with the media. It's sort of to try to defend themselves. My inclination is to think that the news media really were not as influential as they would like to think they were. And it touches on this point where I'm talking about how they trailed public opinion. First of all, I think it's always a mistake to divorce reporters from the public. Reporters are just like everybody else, and they are very much a reflection of what the public's thinking. And when you do see the trends, with most of the news media supportive of American policy, certainly in the early sixties and then when we started putting combat troops in, it really parallels what public opinion is thinking as well. But when I looked back on the public opinion surveys, I began to see that the support for the war, which peaked in about late

1965, early 1966, began to decline through 1966 and you get--I think the most interesting book on the subject is John Mueller's book, called ***War, Presidents, and Public Opinion***. Mueller is a professor at the University of Rochester, and he has published a graph which shows that the proportion of people who approve of the war, the proportion approving declines and the proportion criticizing it is increasing, and they cross somewhere around the fall of 1967, which is several months before the Tet offensive, which is generally credited with having turned public opinion around. And then there's a famous anecdote about Walter Cronkite appearing on television in February of 1968 and Lyndon Johnson saying he's changing public opinion. So that gets you into the question of what changes public opinion, what affects public opinion. And again I just want to mention that one of the people who has been very helpful to me on this whole subject--Mueller is one of them, but another one is a guy called Lawrence Lichty, who was a professor of communications at the University of Maryland and worked on our television project as head of film research, and who knows a lot about the news media and public opinion. He's very interested in the subject. We've discussed this at great length.

I think that certainly one of the things that's important is some direct impact. If a kid gets killed in a neighborhood or in a small town, or several kids in a high school class, it's going to have much more impact on people in that town than anything they see on television screens. People don't watch television news that much anyway, or that

attentively. And by the middle or late 1967 Americans were getting killed in fairly large numbers. So that was having its effect, and it wasn't necessarily the case that you had to know the kid. It was simply that you'd pick up a paper and see that gee, a kid in the block or the neighborhood got killed. I think another important point was when Johnson imposed the tax surcharge. Those two things I think are important.

But now we get into what I consider to be the real crux of the thing and it has a lot to do with the whole question of the war, and this gets us into this thing you mentioned earlier about strategy. I think you're absolutely right. We did have a strategy in Vietnam, and it was the same strategy every American general at least since Grant has used. It's the strategy of attrition. This is the most powerful country in the world and we're going to bring in every piece of hardware we can possibly find and we're going to grind down our enemy. That's what we did in the Civil War and that's how the Union fought the Civil War, that's how we fought the First World War, that's how we fought the Second World War, and that's how we went into Vietnam. And that was Westmoreland's strategy. The whole notion was that you go in there and you just keep killing them until they agree to settle on your terms, which was to get out of the South and go back to status quo ante bellum. Okay. For that reason, we won every battle because we just--the most conservative estimates, and the one I use is that between 1965 and 1973 we killed six hundred thousand and there may very well have been more

than that, which is by American terms maybe ten million Americans if you put it in population terms.

But this is where I think the core of the failure is, that we didn't understand that we were up against an enemy that was prepared to take almost unlimited losses, because they were fighting for something that they thought was an absolute cause. Now, say if you kill five thousand and, as you know, you come back a few months later to the same place and there are another five thousand there, or maybe eight thousand or whatever it was. Now, this takes us into what I think was the essential influence on American opinion. I think the public is prepared to pay money; the public is prepared to take losses. But it wants to see progress, because we are accustomed to wars where, like the Second World War, the Allied forces land at Normandy, June 1944; they cross France, they liberate Paris, they go on across the Rhine, they're marching towards Berlin, you can stick pins in maps. But we have a war where the only device you have for showing progress is a body count which a) is phony; but b) even if it's true it doesn't make any difference as long as you have an enemy that's prepared to feed people into this meat grinder, and has a tremendous manpower pool. It's going to be the same thing over and over again, and finally the public--I think the thing that really is crucial is that finally the public said, "Damn it, if we can't win it, let's get out." And the public, incidentally, was not dovishly antiwar, it was hawkishly antiwar.

I keep getting questions all the time about the effect of the war, antiwar movement. The antiwar movement may have looked good on television, but it really didn't influence people in this country. If anything, it turned them off. When you saw kids running around waving Viet Cong flags, to take the excessive example, that's the sort of thing that turned off people in Middle America. So that if I could simply define the bumper-sticker attitude of people in this country during the Vietnam War, it was it was a mistake to have gotten involved. Okay, as long as we're involved, let's win it. But if we can't win it, let's get out of it and cut our losses. And I think that's essentially what the trend was, and I don't think the media necessarily played a great role in that. I think that was one of those instinctive things that people began to feel. And to simply say that it was bad reporting or biased reporting or whatnot that changed people's opinion, I think that's a simplistic view. People are much more sophisticated than that. People have never believed what they read in the newspapers or watched on television.

Now, I'm not saying that the news media in an election campaign, for example, don't have any influence. If a candidate gets on a screen, or as we can see with Ronald Reagan, if the President himself is on the screen talking and charming the voters, that's fine, but to say that--what's the name of that CBS guy? Morley Safer--changed public opinion because he showed pictures of guys lighting up hooches with Zippos, I mean, that's a flyspeck.

G: I can remember seeing that a year or two later and looking around the room to the other folks, and we all sort of shrugged our shoulders and said, "What's the big deal?"

K: So what? In fact, why should anyone get indignant? I mean, that's what war's about, isn't it? I mean, it may be immoral or whatever, but I mean--and he may have sounded indignant, but that's not the sort of thing that changed public opinion. It's idiotic to think that those things did.

Now, to get back to the subject, which I think is kind of complicated, I think also there's a tremendous difference between public opinion in Washington and public opinion across the country. If Lyndon Johnson is going to sit on his toilet or wherever he was sitting watching three television sets at the same time, and believing the conventional wisdom that the news media were very important, then he was going to be affected because he believed the news media were more important than they really were. And I think fundamentally that the only people who take the news media seriously, or with excessive seriousness, are politicians and the news media people themselves.

When I came back from Asia working for the ***Washington Post***, and went to work as a diplomatic correspondent for the ***Washington Post*** in Washington, the national editor came up to me and said, "There were twenty-five members of the national staff of the ***Washington Post*** and twenty-five members of the ***New York Times*** bureau in Washington, and we fifty people are the most powerful people in America." I thought he was

out of his mind. That's his idea of the importance of the news media. So I think it's a subject that's gotten vastly inflated. I don't want to be dogmatic about it; I'm not saying the news media don't have any importance, but at the same time I think it's gotten greatly exaggerated.

G: You mentioned the Cronkite broadcast in--what was it?--late February of 1968?

K: Yes.

G: And the oft-told tale that LBJ is supposed to have said, "If I've lost Walter, I've lost the country," or words to that effect.

K: Yes.

G: How much truth is there to that, do you think? You've described--

K: The point I try to make, based on my research, is that in terms of support for the war, he had already lost it; he had lost it before that. And Cronkite was really coming on to confirm that, if you want. It's interesting, again, if you look at the public opinion polls during the Tet offensive--and it is true that Johnson's popularity took a nose dive at that stage--but what is interesting is that the public attitudes towards the war and public attitudes toward Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the war are two different things. Except for a little blip just at the beginning of the Tet offensive, when people were rallying around the flag, as they do in a crisis, the line is just continuing its downward trend with no real change. However, Johnson's popularity line drops very sharply, from what you can conclude, I think, that attitudes

towards the war, while they were declining, were not changing significantly. But when you see a drop in Johnson's popularity it's because of Johnson's conduct of the war, which is different from the attitude toward the war itself. And again, just my guess is--it's more than a guess actually--that people were saying, "Damn it, our support for the war is dwindling because he's not prosecuting that war effectively enough." And as I say, one of the little pieces of evidence which is interesting is that a large proportion--I think as many as two-thirds--of the people who voted for Gene McCarthy in New Hampshire in March of 1968, voted for George Wallace in the election, which meant that they were protesting. Gene McCarthy being a peace candidate, they were voting for Gene McCarthy as a protest against Lyndon Johnson, but they weren't peaceniks, since they voted for a super hawk in November.

You can further confirm that if you look at the opinion polls today of people commenting retrospectively on the war. The majority of people, according to a Harris poll that was done for the Veterans Administration in I think 1981 or 1982, think that we could have won the war if we hadn't been sold out by the politicians. It's the politicians who lost the war, particularly Lyndon Johnson, because he did not prosecute it effectively enough. And the poll even shows that a majority of veterans would go back and fight the war again if they could be allowed to win it. What it amounts to is that people don't like to lose wars. It's as simple as that. And their disappointment and their frustration and their impatience because the war wasn't getting anywhere

has more to do with changing their opinion and ultimately has more to do, I think, with our loss and our defeat there than anything else. And you can go back and say that maybe has more to do with the whole approach to the war, which was the notion, this illusion, that sheer power was enough to grind them down. It wasn't.

And just to make a little footnote to that, Westmoreland, who I think is a terribly naive guy, has said something like, "The reason the communists took those casualties is because they don't have the same concern for human life that we have." And then to sort of underline his naïveté, he says if General [Vo Nguyen] Giap was an American general, he would have been sacked overnight. (Laughter) He *wasn't* an American general; that's why he was different. And I don't think it has to do with any regard for human life. I don't think life is any cheaper to them than it is to us. I think you get back to the fact that they were fighting for something that was an absolute cause, and we have taken casualties of the same magnitude if you consider that twenty thousand Americans on both sides died in Antietam in one day or forty thousand British died in a half hour at the Battle of the Somme. People *will* take those kind of crazy casualties. Anyway, that's generally my feeling about it.

G: Okay. Is it fair to ask who the best reporters were covering the war?

K: Oh, yes. Now that's a good question. I wasn't exactly a guy tracking coverage of the war, largely because when you're out there you're not reading other people's stuff or seeing things on television. But let me

throw out a few names of people that I think were really very good: Frank McCulloch, who was a ***Time*** bureau chief there for a number of years and who is now editorial director of the Bee newspapers. I don't know whether you've seen him or not.

G: The ***Sacramento Bee***?

K: He's now director for the three.

G: Oh, he is?

K: Yes, Fresno, Sacramento and whatever the third one is. Superb guy, ex-marine, very sensitive and sophisticated guy. Have you talked to him?

G: We have talked to him; I didn't talk to him.

K: Yes, he's very good. Charlie Mohr, I think, of the ***New York Times*** was a very good combat reporter. Peter Arnett was a good combat reporter. I'm having a little trouble, because they were different people. Ward Just was very good in the brief period he was there. Bob Kaiser of the ***Washington Post***. Peter Kann of the ***Wall Street Journal*** wrote some superb stuff.

You're going to get back to the point, which is that there were some people who were very good on some things and not very good on others. It was one thing to be a combat correspondent, it was another thing to cover the political side of it. There's another thing, to sort of cover the atmosphere of it. And there weren't a lot of people who were doing the whole thing. It's hard to think of many. McCulloch maybe came as close as any I can think of. You got lots of guys like

Takashi Oka of the ***Christian Science Monitor***, who zeroed in on some aspects of it that were very important.

G: Did you know Dan Sutherland?

K: Dan Sutherland is very good. Bill Tuohy of the ***Los Angeles Times*** was very good. I'm trying to think of some of the television people. Jack Reynolds of NBC; Bernie Kalb of CBS--although the peculiar thing about it is that--I just want to go [into] one point about television, that a lot of the really great war footage was done by Vietnamese cameramen, Ha Tu Kanh [?] and a guy called Vo Sung. I mean these guys were really doing heroic things. You'll probably have to refresh me a little bit with names.

G: What did you think of Halberstam' material?

K: That's a little hard for me to say. Halberstam's a friend of mine. (Laughter)

G: All right, that's unfair. I won't--

K: A lot of these guys are colleagues of mine. It's hard to pass judgments about it.

G: Unfair question.

K: He did a lot of good stuff in the early sixties. I think the big problem for a lot of guys and it was a problem for me, too, is to avoid getting carried away by a sense of your own importance. David is a very dynamic guy; he really is tremendously dynamic, and he really zeroes in on things very fast. When he was covering [Vietnam] in 1963, during the Diem period, you remember of course the anecdote about how Kennedy asked

"Punch" [Arthur O.] Sulzberger to remove him from Vietnam. When the president of the United States goes to a publisher of a newspaper and says, "That guy's bothering me. You've got to get rid of him," boy, that's pretty heady stuff for a young reporter. To his credit, they didn't remove him, but you can get carried away by a sense of your own importance.

Neil Sheehan was very good, and Malcolm Browne.

(Interruption)

I can tell you that I wasn't terribly impressed by some people who built tremendous reputations in Vietnam, like Shaplen. I don't know whether you've interviewed him or not.

G: He's in New Jersey, I think.

K: Yes, he lives in Princeton. He'd jump down my throat if--I hate to get quoted by--

G: No, no.

K: He spent a long time out there; he really spent more time out there than anybody else.

G: Did you know [Don] Oberdorfer in those days?

K: Yes, but he wasn't there very much. His book is a very good book. There's a guy called Robert Pisor of the ***Detroit News*** who wrote a first-rate book on Khe Sanh. Don's book is very good, the one on Tet.

G: What about Peter Braestrup's book on the media coverage of Tet?

K: That's the--Peter again is a--I worked with Peter, and he's a good friend. I just disagree with the book. I just think with these

sweeping generalizations about bad coverage--there was bad coverage and there was good coverage and there was indifferent coverage. Some guys had good days and some good guys had bad days. But I don't think it mattered that much, and the problem with Braestrup's book is that it's been picked up by Westmoreland and a lot of other people, to say this is the evidence that the news media lost the war. Of course they've got to find some scapegoat for it.

G: As long as we're on the topic of controversial journalism, what do you make of this CBS/Westmoreland thing?

K: My feeling is, a plague on both their houses. I think it was a lousy television program, but that doesn't exonerate Westmoreland for having been a lousy general.

(Laughter)

Oh, it was terrible. It was trial by television; it was hoked up. My main regret about it is that they could very well get beat. Then it will serve to fuel the people who claim that the news media lost the war. It will justify Westmoreland's claims. So it did a disservice to the news media, but it should not, I think, result in improving Westmoreland's reputation, which I think is somewhat tarnished.

G: Were there any good generals? Who were the good generals?

K: It's hard to say, to pick out any good generals in a war you lost. I don't know.

G: Do you know Fred Weyand?

K: Weyand is a very sensitive and interesting guy. I like a lot of guys that I've talked to. I used to like Bill DePuy. I think that he kind of got carried away, too. He was a guy who in the early days was very wary of the involvement, and then they gave him a division and he became a real hawk. There's a good guy called Doug Kinnard who was only a buck general, who's done a lot of writing about it since then. He is now the head of the Army Historical Project here.

G: I didn't know he had moved.

K: Yes.

G: He's been in New England.

K: Yes, he came down from there and he's here in Washington now.

G: Of course, there was another Kinnard that commanded the First Cav.

K: Yes.

G: Do you know General [Edward] Dessasure?

K: No.

G: Okay. Who were some bad generals?

K: I don't know; you've got to ask people like--I don't like to make those kind of judgments. If you go back to the early days, we had a lot of really bum guys in there as advisers. They all have these names like Hanging Sam and "Iron Mike" O'Daniel and "Stonehead" McGarr.

G: Splithead, wasn't it?

K: Stonehead.

G: Stonehead. I thought it was Splithead.

K: And Harkins, who I don't think really understood very much of what was going on there. But except for individuals, there are no great heroic figures that came out of that war.

G: That's true. No Pattons.

K: Yes; no one's going to build a statue to anybody in some square in Washington.

G: Just for the record, what were your periods of duty over there? When were you physically present in Vietnam? I don't mean to try to get every weekend that you've spent when you were based in Hong Kong.

K: It's hard to say. But I would say it was pretty steadily from 1959 through 1970. Then I came home and I didn't go back there until 1973 when I went back with NBC. Then again, let's see--between 1971 and 1973 I was based in Washington and I was spending a lot of time on the diplomatic side of the story. Then I went out there in 1973. I was out there for a few months and then I didn't go back until I went to Vietnam in 1981.

During the period I was there I used to go down there pretty often, but it all depended on--it's hard to say [with] what frequency. Sometimes I'd go down there every month or so. When Ward [Just] got wounded, I had to go down there for quite a stretch. Then there were periods when I really opted out of it. I had to cover China, too, and the cultural revolution period in China, 1966-1967--

G: That was a tough thing to report on, wasn't it?

K: --while I was in Hong Kong. No, we had a lot of information.

G: Did you?

K: Yes, tremendous. I wrote a book about that, too, which is coming out again in the fall. Again, it was one of those things: there's a lot of information, and how do you figure it out? But I would get down there maybe four or five times a year, even during that period, because I had to break off. I remember doing all sorts of things like going to these conferences in Honolulu and Manila and coming back to the States. You couldn't shake it off. You had to be on top of it all the time.

I started working for the ***Washington Post*** in 1965. We didn't have a bureau in Saigon then. We had a guy there, kind of a part-time correspondent. He was a little more than being just a stringer. I can't remember when the bureau was opened and who the first correspondent was. I have a little trouble remembering that. But once they had a permanent bureau there for the ***Post***--there was one or two things: I would go down there to spell people, but also the extent to which I was also getting involved in it was to go to places where the guy who was based in Saigon stayed in Vietnam. I also had a very good entrée into Cambodia through Sihanouk, who I was on good terms with, which--he was very difficult about letting people in. So I used to go to Cambodia a lot, or Laos, or Thailand, all of which were kind of somehow connected with the war. So if I wasn't in Vietnam or I wasn't in Hong Kong, or I wasn't in one of the other places in my vast territory--and we had the Philippines and Indonesia and Taiwan--or covering China from Hong Kong; I used to go down there, I used to go to those places quite often, too.

We were flying out of Thailand. Cambodia was a good place; it was the only place where I could get any of the communist side of the war.

G: Who did you talk to?

K: Wilfred Burchett was there. He and I became pretty good friends. I had reservations about him. He just died recently.

G: Oh, he did?

K: Yes. I had considerable reservations about him, since he was sort of flacking for the communists. But in a time when we didn't have any contact at all, it was the best we could do. And also I used to see the Russians in Phnom Penh. They were quite useful. The Russian embassy was available. I think the first time we really got into direct contact with the communists was [when] I started covering the peace talks in Paris in 1968, and I was there for a few months until they began to drag on. [When] we started out there they were very reluctant to get in touch with us, but we started out--to give you an idea of--it's hard to imagine, looking back, how little real contact there was. One day not long after the so-called peace talks started, I had this idea that maybe we could--the only way you could get to the Viet Cong, or the communists, was to go to the press conferences where they just read all this boiler-plate stuff. So I had this idea that maybe we could do this end run and establish some kind of relationship with the North Vietnamese journalists who were covering the thing. I think I had that idea, so I proposed to--I had a friend of mine, Tony Lewis, who was a ***New York Times*** correspondent then based in London, and who's an old friend of

mine, a schoolmate of mine. So I said, even though he was [in] competition with me, "Why don't we approach these guys and ask them if we can--why don't we invite them to dinner?" So we used Burchett to do this, as the intermediary. He was in Paris at the time, too, flacking for the communists. So God, it was almost like a parallel negotiation. It took us I don't know how long; it took us a couple of weeks before these guys finally in very, very gingerly--a couple of these communist correspondents agreed to come out to dinner with us. There was me and Lewis and Hedrick Smith of the ***New York Times***. And we took them to a very fancy restaurant and Burchett came along. But I remember that the interesting thing was that we told the mission--Harriman was the head of the mission at that time--we told them that we were going to do this. So they said--turning the tables--to us, "We hope you'll brief us on what happened at your dinner," because they weren't getting anything out of these meetings except boiler plate.

G: They wanted the take.

K: So we said, "Okay, fine." I think Harriman's deputy then was Bill Sullivan, and there were a whole bunch of other guys in the delegation we knew. We were all staying in the same hotel, at the Crillon [?].

G: Bill Jorden was there then, wasn't he?

K: Bill Jorden was there and Dick Holbrooke was there, and Tony Lake and Dick Moose, I mean all these guys--Dan Davidson. At any rate, we were all staying in the Crillon Hotel, a very cozy relationship.

So I remember we came back from this dinner, slightly tipsy from all the wine, and we walked into the lobby of the hotel, and all these guys from the delegation, except Harriman, who had gone to sleep, were waiting for us, and they had a phone line open to Washington, and we were going to be debriefed and they were going to give a report. And actually at our dinner nothing had happened. We chitchatted and so forth in order to break the ice, and some Vietnamese would say something and then afterward we'd say, "What did he really mean by that?" As if we--it was all very silly. And then they invited us back and vice versa, and it went on for a while, but it didn't yield very much.

Then I do remember that I put Burchett in contact with Harriman, and they went out and had lunch together. But really we were all grasping at straws.

We interviewed John Negroponte, who was also in that delegation, who is now the ambassador in Honduras. He tells a story about how when they first arrived in Paris, they just moved into hotels thinking that they were going to get it all settled very shortly. Months dragged on and eventually they had to find apartments because it was getting so expensive. So there was very little--that's why we really didn't have a hell of a lot to go with, except reading. That was anther advantage of Hong Kong, is that you could sit there and you could monitor Hanoi Radio and try and do some kind of Kremlinology. But I think it was a big gap in the coverage of the war, that we weren't able to go to North Vietnam. And I think it was a big mistake on their part that they didn't let

people in. I think they would have gotten pretty--if not sympathetic, then somewhat understanding coverage.

G: They did get some sympathetic coverage when they finally did start letting other people in.

K: Yes, but I mean they--all they got was Harrison Salisbury, and that was what? late 1966. And then there wasn't anything for a long time. And what he wrote was very controversial, and they would have been better off if they had just let people open bureaus there and so forth. American organizations should have opened bureaus there. Of course, it would have been very unusual. But it wasn't a declared war; there was no reason why they couldn't do that. When I covered the Algerian War, it was very easy to deal with both sides. You could go to Morocco or Tunisia or Cairo and see the National Liberation Front people there. Some of them are still good friends of mine. Then you could go to Algiers or Paris and see the French. You had the best of both worlds--or the worst.

G: Worst of worlds, maybe.

K: (Laughter) But anyway, so I'm going down to Central America next week.

G: Next week?

K: In a week or ten days, yes.

(Interruption)

I just sort of think that when you sort of approach a subject like this--I finished it almost a year ago and I'm trying to recover from it since. It's a much bigger chunk of work than you think you're going to

get into. The biggest problem you have, if I can name-drop, as Hemingway once told me, "The art of writing is knowing what to throw away," and you can go on for ten or fifteen volumes with just--the amount of material that I've had is--I've got vast amounts of stuff that I just couldn't fit in there and couldn't get into. Every once in a while I'll get a letter from somebody that says, "I liked your book very much, but there's one flaw in it. You make no reference to the 514th Engineering Battalion at Bien Hoa."

(Laughter)

Or there's a lot of complaints from women that they're not mentioned, the nurses. But trying to put the whole thing together in one volume is not easy. I think we're going to get a glut of material, the Army Historical Series, all sorts of people are doing things.

G: What's some good fiction on the war, do you think?

K: I haven't read a hell of a lot of fiction on the war, to tell you the truth. That's something probably I ought to start doing. I just hear about some. The only books I've read on the war by actual GIs in the war were non-fiction things, and Phil Caputo I think has done a great--I think ***A Rumor of War*** is a good book. Fred Downs' book, I can't remember the title of it--I think it's called ***The Fire Zone*** [***The Killing Zone***. Then there are these collections of experiences by Al Santoli, and I think Michael Herr's book was very good, ***Dispatches***.

When I was writing my own book, I really didn't want to get overloaded with stories, because again what you get into--I went through

a pile of books trying to sort of isolate from each one particular kinds of experiences which were different: what it was like to be on a patrol; what it was like to be a pilot, what it was like to be a doctor, and so forth, just to try and see it from all those different sides. Because one thing about it is that if you're a reporter, unless you were some guy who was out in the field all the time, and I wasn't, that wasn't my thing, you go out once in a while and just get a little flavor and that's it, as far as I was concerned. But even a reporter who was out in the field was nothing like being a GI in the field. They would go out for a few days periodically and then go back, whereas if you were out there humping the bush, you were out there all the time. And that was a lot different. So you couldn't--even Herr, who stayed out there for long periods and was not in the military like Caputo was, it's just different; I mean it's just different from what it's like to really be in the army, as you know. No observer can get as close to it as you can by depending on other people's experience, by having other people, GIs, to tell you that experience. I was in the army myself, but my experience was Catch-22. (Laughter)

G: When were you in the army?

K: I was in the army during the Second World War.

G: Were you? You don't seem old enough to have been in the Second World War.

K: It's no secret. I'm fifty-nine, so I was in the army from 1943 to 1946, Army Air Corps, and it was just like Catch-22; it was one of those crazy air bases.

(Laughter)

G: Where was it?

K: I was up in Northern India, in the CBI Theater, the China-Burma-India Theater.

G: You and Dean Rusk were fellow soldiers. (Laughter)

K: No, Dean Rusk was a colonel; I was a corporal.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

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