INTERVIEW III

DATE: November 15, 1971

INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT KOMER

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Komer's office, RAND Corporation, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 3

M: You were, for part of the time in 1964 and '65, the White House man on Africa as well as the Middle East. To what extent did the White House get involved in the Congo crisis of June 1964?

K: You mean the rescue of the people at Stanleyville?

M: Right.

K: Judging from a few memos I have here that were done either at the time or close to, we were very actively involved in the White House, and the President gave the final okay and kept in very close touch with it. But I was unable to recall very much about that when--

(Interruption)

Now, I see from these things that the President was quite actively involved. It happened, you know, at dawn on the 24th of November.

M: November? That was the summer of '64, wasn't it?

K: No, the actual rescue mission I think was--

M: I guess the crisis began--

K: Oh, long before. I see a note here on the capture of Stanleyville on the 5th of August, and a NSC meeting chaired by the President on the 11th of August, etc.

M: So it engaged his attention fairly early before--

K: Quite early. But the chief actor, short of Mac Bundy himself, appears to be Bill Brubeck.

M: So that was not your--

K: So that was not my account as of that time. I'm really quite surprised at that because I thought I had taken over the African business from Brubeck long before this. I suspect that what may have happened is that Brubeck was over at State or something because I thought he had gone to London before this.

At any rate, judging from what's in the file, including a chronology, this was not my action so I can't add anything to it.

M: That's a good enough reason not to go into too much detail. Does a situation like that usually get to be presidential?

K: Unquestionably. Any issue of that importance--not broad-scale foreign policy importance but which can have serious short term backlash is a presidential matter.

M: Do you mean domestic political backlash or international--?

K: Both.

M: Does Africa have peculiar susceptibility to domestic political backlash?

K: Not necessarily at all. Everything has domestic political backlash.

M: You talked last time about the India-Pakistan crisis only in the most general way, switched off onto another topic and you never had a chance to return. Now, that was your account.

K: That was indeed.

M: How did the details of that unfold within the West Wing?

K: It's very hard to reconstruct details several years later. I find that there's really not an awful lot that I can add at this late date to what I said before. Now, if you had some more specific questions.

M: Did the President resist kicking and screaming, the fact that the Russians tended to get most of the credit for the settlement that was finally agreed upon?

K: Quite the contrary. That was a deliberate policy of ours, approved by the President, that for once we would try to get the Soviets hooked into being in the middle and taking the onus for failure, taking heat--if possible--and if they got the thing settled, getting the bulk of the credit for it. I thought that was a very shrewd and astute move on our part.

Not only did the President approve, but I do not recall offhand any unhappiness on his part. It turned out rather a relief that getting the Soviets in there in the middle had managed to solve the thing.

Now, when the inside story of the settlement of the Three Week War is written, I think people will find out that the Americans had at least as much to do with pressuring or persuading both sides to lay off as the Russians. But our role was quiet, and their role was the overt one, with what's-his-name calling them to Tashkent etc, etc., and patching up a compromise between Ayub and Shastri.

M: You imply that before the event, we encouraged them to seek a settlement, not merely approved one that they were suggesting?

K: Yes. We strongly encouraged the Paks and the Indians to settle this thing by compromise. Our cutting off of military aid to both sides was a major reason why they had to go for compromise. Ayub could see that if the war continued much longer that he was up the creek. He would run out of military resources. That was why he had to go to Tashkent.

And the diplomacy of the Americans in holding off and refusing the increasingly impassioned requests of the Paks that we make good on commitments to them which we did not have--we had no commitment as they defined it. SEATO was an anti-Communist alliance, etc., etc. So I think that our refusing to weigh in on either the Pak or the Indian side turned out, net, to be a pro-Indian gesture because it hurt the Paks much more than the Indians.

M: Did you get accused of being pro-Indian as you had been in the past by the President?

K: Yes. I forget whether as late as 1965 he was still calling me an "India lover." But I'll simply reply that whatever he called me periodically--and he had these names for a lot of people on a lot of issues--one of the important threads that runs through the entire Johnson period is that, however anti-Indian he might seem in the various things he said, he continued and even extended the basically pro-Indian policy of Kennedy--indeed went further along the same lines. I might add he accomplished more than Kennedy, too.

Particularly in a period when we see this administration in the last three years sort of slipping back for reasons which totally escape me into the old pro-Pak attitudes of the '50's (of the Foster Dulles period), it reminds me even more how far LBJ carried the policy of sorting out and restructuring our security stake and our stake in the subcontinent. Because of course the next major phase after the Pak-Indian war was the great Indian famine, in which LBJ showed, I think, rare operational skill in using that famine and using the way in which he doled out the wheat, etc., which they needed to force

a thorough restructuring of India's five-year economic planning and to force the Indians to give far greater emphasis to agriculture, fertilizer, etc., etc. This has had remarkable success in the period since '66-'67. There has been a radical turn-around in India's agricultural output, and I think LBJ deserves far more credit for that than he will ever get from the Indians.

M: Yes, you covered that pretty well in the last interview.

K: Yes. Now, let me say that always LBJ was orally sympathetic to the Paks. He liked Ayub, as he kept telling me. I think in the last interview I went back and described how really the first thing he took up with me personally in Air Force One, heading off to Beirut in 1962 was "please explain to me the Kennedy policy of being so nice to India and so nasty to my friend Ayub."

M: You were the one doing most of the briefing of him. How thoroughly on an issue like this that has murky beginnings and complicated things back and forth--how thoroughly did he ever really master the issues? Did he really understand what the India-Pakistan business was all about, or did he pretty well have to go to you every time something came up like this to find out again?

K: I think he understood the fundamentals pretty damned well. And the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Was his policy more or less successful? Did he seem to know what he was doing? Yes. You know, a President has an infinite number of issues on his plate at any given time. Viet Nam was of course heating up at this time, so the number of hours that a President can spend on an issue like this one is limited. I was always, from the beginning to the end of my service in the White House, a believer in not badgering Presidents constantly

with operational detail, especially on issues which we couldn't affect on a day-to-day basis. Even so, the President is kept informed by his intelligence briefing in the morning, by those people down in the basement of the White House--you can see the process continues today relatively unchanged. He was kept up to date on the intelligence.

M: So he didn't have to be reeducated every time as to the broad goals he was trying to accomplish?

K: Frequently he would ask to be reeducated, and that was just to force you to revalidate the policy line. That was constantly one of his tricks.

M: Consciously undertaken?

K: Certainly. I'm sure others went through the same travail that I did when the President played dumb. Kennedy never used this particular trick. I'm sure that Eisenhower didn't. But LBJ frequently would play dumb. "Now, you know, you got me into this last time, Bob, but now what about this time?"

Perhaps the most notable occasion of his forcing us to constantly revalidate policy was in the great Indian famine exercise of '65-'66. There he was constantly asking, "I don't understand these figures, give them to me again. Are you sure the figures are right?" It turned out that the figures were partly wrong and that he was right in playing dumb with Orville Freeman and the State Department and myself. It was very educational, for me at any rate.

M: Not just for him.

K: Not just for him. It turned out that his instincts were much shrewder than ours. This was particularly on such things as how much they needed in the way of relief supplies, how long it would

take the ships to get there, etc. I think I went through much of that last time.

M: How about the resumption of aid after the war--

K: I notice you said that. There was not much resumption of military aid.

M: The reason I've made a point to ask it is that it, of course, has become a hot issue again today by the Bangladesh people particularly.

K: It has.

M: And I was under the impression that not a great amount had been given--

K: That is correct. I think if you'll go back and look at the record, there was very little resumption of aid--military aid--in that period. In fact, I think you will find that we were slow to resume economic aid on the prior scale as well. I have some papers in here, but unfortunately I didn't study my brief as well as I should have.

M: Those papers you're referring to now are part of the White House papers, I take it.

K: Yes, they're copies of memos of mine and my assistants.

M: The amounts are not particularly--

K: I'm not looking for the amounts. What I'm looking for is whether we resumed aid, but that's on the public record.

M: Yes. The point is that there was no point at which some presidential decision got terribly important as to whether we would or would not.

K: That was a major issue right from the end of the three week war to the time when I switched over to being a Viet Nam hand--at which time I laid down all my other briefs at the President's express request. He said to me the morning that he told me I was going to

be the "Viet Nam other warrior" that he didn't want to hear from me or see me on any other subject at all except Viet Nam from then on.

That afternoon, totally forgetting--though he didn't forget--he called me up and said, "What the hell have you done about Indira Gandhi's visit? She's going to be here in two days, and I don't have a damned thing. Will you please get onto it?"

I did not say to him, "Mr. President, I mentioned that to you this morning."

So he said, "As soon as you get through with the Gandhi visit, I want you full-time on Viet Nam."

M: So you dropped it after that, that would be somebody else's program after that.

K: Right. Up to that time in the period between late '65 and early '66 the question of when we would resume arms aid to the Paks was a quite live one, with the Pentagon--as I recall--and to an extent State pressing for some resumption and the Paks screaming for it because they had lost an incredible amount of resources in the three week war and they were eager to recoup their losses.

M: The President was just kind of walking around that problem at that time?

K: He was stalling. I was advising stalling. If I'm not mistaken, we stalled right on through the end of the Johnson Administration. In fact, I don't think the Nixon people have shipped them very much military aid. It has mostly been only spare parts, etc. I don't recall when that decision was made--maybe under Johnson, maybe under Nixon--but all this to-do about U.S. military aid to Pakistan is just a grotesque exaggeration of the fact because since '65, since

well before the three week war, we had started clamping down.

M: On military.

K: On military assistance, because I--I was just one--I and others, over considerable opposition, had finally gotten Kennedy's and Johnson's ear with the proposition that this military assistance to Pakistan was buying us very little in terms of our interests and was having highly counterproductive effects on our larger relations with India; that the old rubric under which we'd been giving MAP to Pakistan, that it was an ally of ours in SEATO and CENTO, was simply a mirage. And that whatever the merits of that argument back in '54 and '55 and '56, that it had never proved out in practice--and that, in fact, the Paks were interested in aid from us for only one reason: to advance Pak interests vis-a-vis India.

M: Which was not in our interest.

K: Which was not to our interest, even though many people were quite sympathetic with the Pakistani position on the thorny issue of Kashmir. One of the things we had managed to do, which was sort of a precursor of the Johnson decision to let the Russians compromise out the Three Week War, had been a previous set of decisions that we were going to disengage from the Kashmir issue too and not back the Pakistanis in their constant attempts to raise it again at the U.N. or in other forum, or to get the Americans in the middle to force a compromise.

As it turned out, the Three Week War so completely overshadowed Kashmir that at Tashkent they didn't have much discussion of that question. I think that the Kashmir question was very largely settled de facto by the Three Week War, which marked a basic change in the

balance of power between India and Pakistan.

M: And didn't hurt our interests. I believe Mr. Johnson appointed you Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. That was the first time that title had been used. Carl Kaysen never really had that title before, did he?

K: I'm not sure. I think you might find that he did.

M: He had it? Why did Mr. Johnson decide to appoint you when Francis Bator--

K: I think you may also find that before Kaysen, Rostow had it.

M: You went back that far?

K: 1961.

M: I thought they used a lower ranking title.

K: Negative. It can be checked.

M: It's a matter of public record, yes.

K: But at any rate, I think Walt Rostow was the number two, and clearly stated as the Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, until he left to become the head of the State Department policy planning staff at the end of '61. Then I believe Kaysen also had it, and when Carl left, nobody had it.

I had been there by that time. I was the charter member of the "Bundy State Department," so-called. I was the first man hired by Rostow and Bundy.

By '64 I had been there for a good long time.

M: The turnover was pretty fast in that office.

K: Not really. There were in-and-outers, mostly from academia, but the hard core was still there. Bundy was still there. I was still there. Bromley Smith was still there--not all that much movement in and out.

At any rate, I had been given an offer by McNaughton, with McNamara's approval, to come over and be a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in ISA, with the possibility, if I cut the mustard, of becoming principal deputy; and then maybe if McNaughton went on to something else--which he had indicated might be in the cards at some indefinite future date--having a shot at being the Assistant Secretary of Defense. This was better than being a faceless person on the White House staff.

We still were assigned to the NSC staff, which had become a dirty word as a result of the Eisenhower years. We always were very unhappy that we were still called NSC staff, even though senior staff, or whatever, because of its imagery tie-in to that sort of non-period when the staff had been a sad affair, in my judgment. I served as the CIA liaison to the NSC staff and the alternate planning board member in 1958 and 1960, so I've seen it from the inside. I was one of those who quite agreed that it had become a terrible papermill, a rather low-grade operation--this is the staff, not the special assistants themselves--and that it might as well be abolished.

So the NSC structure was abolished in name. It continued in practice--as it does to this day. These are largely cosmetic changes, and OCB was abolished.

I was unhappy over the fact that here I not only had won my spurs with the New Frontier, but that I was clearly not only known to, but favorably regarded by President Johnson. So after things had settled down I wanted to go over to DOD. Bundy said he'd raise it with the President and brought me back word soon thereafter that

the President said, no, he didn't want Komer going anywhere.

This, I think, was one of the reasons why somewhat later the President, who I'm sure had heard of my unhappiness from Bundy, revived the old title and promoted me into it.

Simultaneously he promoted Francis Bator, who had come down to replace Kaysen on the economic side and had expanded to take over European issues and things like that. Francis is a very ambitious fellow. and he too was getting to be a little unhappy. So he and I were both expressing our unhappiness and beating on--I don't think beating on is too strong a term; this happened over a period of several months, you know--letting our unhappiness be known to our boss by McGeorge Bundy, who was rather uninterested in this type of thing. He would say, "Look, you've got all the power; you're dealing directly with the President; you are known all around town as the President's men --why are you worried about the symbols or the trappings!"

The answer, which Bator and I both gave him, was, "You know, that's easy for you to say because you're sitting there in the White House with the trappings and symbols and everything else. It does help us operationally." This is what you get paid off in. You get paid off in these little things like having a title and being anointed, etc.

M: I'm in my eighteenth hour with Francis Bator right now.

K: Paige, you may, unless you're careful, get the illusion that Francis was running the <u>whole</u> policy. It would be interesting to contrast Francis' story about this with mine, because this is the sort of thing that Francis can wax eloquent on, I'm sure.

At any rate, finally, as it will, in a typically Johnsonian way

we were told one day that he was going to appoint both of us Deputy Special Assistants to the President, and that, as Bundy put it, since I was the senior, I would be the senior. But I wouldn't be first deputy, I would simply be the one who would act in his stead when he wasn't there. That happened several times. But really Francis and I were on the same level.

M: Did you have any trouble dividing it up between you?

K: None. We each continued to do exactly what we had been doing. Bundy was still there, after all. As I say, the only change which it made substantively was that on those few occasions when Bundy was away in Antigua or on a trip, I went over and sat for a few days in his office. That was it, period.

Now, Francis and I were, and are, close friends, and he's a whizbang. We had no problems with each other. Our parts of the world were rather separated, and those times when we came together, as on foreign aid, we worked very closely together because it was more important to be allies against the great bureaucracies than to spend time squabbling among ourselves. We never did that.

M: You started the next question. How much trouble, and how difficult to beat down the great bureaucracies?

K: On some issues harder than others. By this time I had acquired a certain amount of on-the-job training. By and large I think I had a reasonably respectable batting average, thanks to a) my experience; b) the fact that I knew everybody in my business by then and was rather a senior man--Talbot had gone off so I was the only one left. There had been changesin DOD, etc. So I was really an element of continuity by the time LBJ took over.

Second, it was perfectly clear to all concerned that I had the President's confidence. That's more important than anything else, you know. If you have a policy argument with State or Defense or anybody and the issue goes to the President and the President rules in your favor clearly, that is the kind of signal that bureaucracies take in loud and clear. And my batting average on that score was pretty reasonable.

M: You did go directly to the President?

K: Yes, that had started way back, as you can find in the Kennedy Oral History, that had started way back in '62 when I had finally won my spurs with Kennedy in the early days of "Komer's War"--the non-war in Yemen which Kennedy dubbed "Komer's War." From that time on Bundy told me, the very next day after that fascinating episode, "From now on, it's clear that the President knows you and trusts you to the extent that you can start dealing with him directly on any of the issues that are in your purview."

I always kept Bundy informed, and frequently it was quite advisable to go through Bundy, because if he signed on that carried more weight than if I were doing it.

M: You mentioned several times in the last couple of tapes about the hair-raising six weeks when you more or less did Bundy's job right as he was leaving, or as he left in February-March of '66. What particular issues came to the surface during that time? I suppose you could list them if we had several days, but maybe you can equal Francis Bator's eighteen hours here.

K: I won't do that.

M: It's worth your discussing those six weeks as a unit, I think.

K: I'll be happy to discuss them as a unit, though not any substantive issues. Because let me say that I learned very quickly that what I had suspected was true: that all substantive issues coming the way of the President, plus at least twice that number of issues that had not yet gotten to the President might never get to the President, all focused in on Bundy. I had known that that spot had become one of the "indispensable man in Washington," but for six weeks I lived it. I know for a fact everything came there, so it wasn't any particular issue--it was all the issues that engaged the White House, even below the level of the President, in the national security field broadly construed.

M: That includes a lot of things.

K: And how! So nothing stands out. Simply providing the link between the White House and all of its interested staff components and the President and the great bureaucracies was an incredibly full-time job, I found myself going crazy because even though I had been Bundy's senior deputy, I had not until the day he left been engaged in, or knowledgable even, of more than, let's say, a quarter to a third of the problems he was handling at any given time. So all of a sudden, I was it! I wasn't just Komer; I was sitting in Bundy's chair. It was really the most hectic four or five weeks I've spent in a long, long time.

M: Did that maybe say something fairly important? You say that nothing stands out. Does that mean that it's so important that really anybody who holds it is not going to be able to give the kind of attention--?

K: No. I think that would be an incorrect inference. As I recall at that

time, which was essentially the month of March 1965--

M: '66, I think.

K: Sorry, '66, there were no major critical issues. Viet Nam was very much on all of our minds and took up a lot of time. By the way, this was my first introduction to Viet Nam, too. I had had nothing to do with Viet Nam previously, and all of a sudden I was sitting in McGeorge Bundy's chair.

First of all, the secret intelligence issues were not given to me, and I was grateful for it. Bill Moyers ad hoc took on that and I won't go into it further. However, the technical intelligence problems did keep coming through me, and one of the points that I remember was that within two days I was given three or four additional special clearances of one kind or another that I'd never had before. Let's say there's a big program involving a lot of money. That involved an operational clearance. I had the client clearances for the output, but I did not have the clearances for the technical details, which were important, if I was to be reporting to the President, or pulling together the views of the Science Adviser and others as to whether we should invest this money or take another step or something like that. So that was an immense added responsibility.

Then it was simply the matter of dealing directly with Rusk and McNamara and Helms and everybody else who had, by that time, become quite accustomed to going to the Bundy office as the channel for all the business that didn't get taken up directly, and most of it didn't get taken up directly, at least not without some preparation. I first realized the full magnitude of what

Mac Bundy did!

M: Do you think that contributed substantially to his leaving, or were there other reasons why he chose to leave?

K: I won't comment on that. He's the best judge of that. I will say this much. I doubt that was a significant reason. Let me backtrack. I doubt that was the main reason for his leaving, because by that time Mac, who is superlatively quick, could keep a hundred balls in the air at one time, was really doing it with his left hand. That part of the job wasn't burdening him down too heavily. Substance, of course, might be another matter. But what to me was almost an insuperable task of trying to sit in Bundy's chair and keep those hundred balls in the air was to him by that time sort of second nature. After all, he'd been five years in the job by then.

M: Was there serious consideration for your staying in that job?

K: Yes. You'll have to ask the President how serious it was. All I know is this--and it might be an interesting part of the story--that about two weeks before Bundy left, which was the last day of February '66, he called me in and told me that he was going to be leaving. I think I was one of the early ones to know, aside from the top level people.

I was very unhappy that he was going because I'm a great admirer of Mac Bundy. He's an outstanding man in so many ways. But, anyway, he indicated to me either then or shortly thereafter that he was recommending to the President that I be actively considered as his successor. On at least two or three other occasions in the two weeks before he left, he went further and indicated to me that I was his number one recommendation; that I was his recommendation for his successor on the grounds that the President knew me and trusted me;

on the grounds that I knew more about the workings of the operation, having been there longer, etc., than anyone else; on the grounds that I was a little more experienced than Francis and had handled a broader range of problems, etc. I suspect, though he never said it, that in his view there were not many other candidates whom he could wholeheartedly recommend.

So maybe it wasn't that Mac thought I was so great as that he couldn't think of anybody else who could handle it with LBJ. Now whether that's a lefthanded compliment or not, I want to tell you that I can remember as if it were yesterday that I was terribly flattered that Bundy should think I could handle that job, because it was a killer, as I have described discovering later.

M: It was not the Peter Principle lateral transfer by any means.

K: No. Bundy was not terribly outgoing. Obviously it was the President's choice, etc. etc.

But there's an interesting facet. As the time drew nigh--Bundy had gone, I think, on his last trip to Viet Nam in early '66 and while he was away I had sat at his desk. But the tendency in town was to hold up on some things if Bundy wasn't there, rather than let me handle them, so I didn't take over full-fledged, so to speak. But as soon as he came back he said he was going to try and get this thing settled. Mac felt it very important there not be a hiatus for essential operational reasons. There should not be a big hiatus in that crucial job. I could not agree more that a President could not afford to have a long hiatus in the job which is so closely

related to his ability to exercise his authority. It's really his chief-of-staff for national security policy. Now, to the extent that McNamara handled the defense aspects, there was not the same need for a chief-of-staff on Defense stuff. But where Defense interacted with State, etc., Bundy and Bundy's office were the outfit that really knitted everything together. When the intelligence people came in with something that needed to be tied in with what the Defense people thought, the State people thought. . . .

M: Everybody, Commerce, Treasury--

K: It could be everybody. It was and is an indispensable role, which, by the way, leads me to look with ill disguised scorn on all of these proposals that we return power to the State Department. A President cannot function without a staff like that if he is going to exercise his constitutional responsibility. And security policy and foreign policy has just gotten far too big for a State Department, particularly one constituted basically the same way it was in 1945, to handle.

Now this gets us into quite another issue. But at any rate, I was not only very flattered, but well aware of the importance of the continuity in the job.

Finally, the last two days Bundy raised it again with the President. He was in a poor position to do so, as he told me, because after all, if he was leaving and it was the President's decision, it was sort of hard for Mac to keep reminding him, "Mr. President, we really ought to put somebody in there before I leave, or as of the time I leave, etc., etc."

Well, the 28th of February came around, Bundy was leaving, I kept saying to him--I must have said half dozen times in the last

three days, "Have you settled the matter yet." I think that even in his farewell chat with the President before he left on the 28th he raised it again. Finally he said, it was either a farewell chat or a phone call, but he finally said, "Mr. President, I am leaving momentarily. Now, what do I do about this?" And the word came down from the President to Bundy, "Tell Komer that he is to sit in your chair and do what needs to be done of your job, but he is to be absolutely invisible. I do not want anybody to see or hear or know that Komer is in the chair." The President apparently did not say anything to Bundy about whether he was going to put me in permanently or acting or for how long or whatever, but I was finally told because the decision at that point was inescapable.

Well, it's almost a contradiction in terms, that you're to be invisible but you're to do all the work that Bundy had done. And of course one of the problems was that Bundy had become pretty visible by that time. It was in the nature of things. But I said, if that's the way the President wants it that ad interim I would sit in that chair, do the job, but act as if I didn't exist.

That was a typical Johnsonian ploy, keeping his options open, as they say. I'm a good soldier, and I was immensely loyal to the President, as I still am, so I did it. And that led to all sort of complications. Of course the President did indicate--he must have, or Bundy indicated to at least the senior actors, McNamara, Rusk, etc., that I would be sitting there and the store would still be open for business. I don't recall now, though I am sure that there were then all sorts of end runs and problems of this sort and that sort.

The only painful thing that I remember, because I expected the others, was that Bromley Smith, who was sort of the chief paper-shuffler in the office adjacent to Mac, seemed to have taken it very badly that I would be appointed ad interim rather than himself. This sort of amazes me. By the way, Smith never said this so I'm strictly inferring. But I had real problems, of all places, with the guy in the adjacent office to me in the White House basement who was, in effect, saying to me: "I'll send these papers out directly to the agencies, or up to the President, or to others on the White House staff." He was not showing me the key cables, he was not alerting me. His function was to process all the mail, however important or unimportant, and to make sure that Bundy got the important things on his desk pronto and that Bundy was aware of what was coming in in the way of proposals, etc.--a very important function, not a chief of staff, but sort of secretary general staff in the military parlance.

M: Yes. He had been there since the late '50's, though--

K: Since the late '50's, really knew his job, was one of those supreme bureaucrats who rarely allowed himself any policy judgment at all. When asked by Bundy, as he was many, many times, particularly in the early days, you know, "What do you think about this" would always finesse it, never wanted to be caught saying, "We ought to do this, or we ought to do that." So he had carved out his role.

But for some reason or other, and the only one I can judge is that he thought that I shouldn't be in the job, but that he should--I had great problems with him.

So I finally had to send the word upstairs to the President, once directly in a memo and twice through Bill Moyers: "Would somebody please tell Bromley Smith"--Bundy had gone by this time--"that the President has put Komer in charge!" Finally the word did filter down in what I regarded as rather an unsatisfactory way so we resolved that problem. I had it out with Smith even beforehand. I said, "Look, we just can't afford this. We're dealing with highly important affairs of state. And to be in a situation where you are not giving me the kind of materials I need and the support I need for reasons which you are unwilling to tell me--this just cannot continue."

He said, "Well, we'd better clarify this with the President." I did clarify it with the President.

But interestingly enough, LBJ does not think managerially about a lot of these things. That is not his style. He's a better manager than many Presidents, and I think he's going to turn out to be a great President. If you could only have excised the Viet Nam tragedy, he'd be a great President today--maybe still President, almost certainly still President. But LBJ's highly personalized way of dealing with people was not well suited to this kind of issue, which to him must have appeared to be pretty minor league. Eisenhower would have seen, the first time Mac Bundy mentioned it two weeks in advance, that continuity in a crucial staff job is essential, and the new man would have been appointed before the old man left, and it all would have gone like clockwork except that it might have been the wrong appointment. LBJ paid a lot more attention to issues which I regarded as very important, but this was

not his strongest suit.

My allies were, first, Moyers, who did understand this, and who was in effect chief of staff to the President during that period, even closer to LBJ in terms of making the White House run than Sorensen had been to Kennedy. I think Moyers was just outstanding. But Francis Bator and I were sort of left hanging, holding the bag. Francis was stalwart during this period and he can probably give you --because his memory is much better for these details than mine-- some horror stories about the way I was really grasping for straws.

At any rate, this continued. I knew that it was silly to ask the President when he was going to make up his mind. Indeed, it might be counterproductive in terms of my being confirmed in the job for me even to press him on the issue, because he did not like that sort of thing, and I knew damned well he knew what was going on. There was just no point in my saying, "Mr. President, I'm down here and our authority is eroding and I'm not able to serve you properly because I'm a non-man in a crucial job." He knew that, and that to him wasn't all that important until he had made up his mind. Again, he didn't rate the managerial values as high as some others might.

But during this period, the White House did, through its usual devious channels, put out the word that the President was thinking of downgrading the job; that Bundy had become too much of a public personality; and that maybe there wouldn't even be a job of Special Assistant for National Security Affairs anymore, etc., etc. [There was] no mention at all of me. Much of the usual speculation in the press as to who was going to get the job, to none of which I paid

much attention. Nor did I pay much attention to what was obviously a White House inspired leak about how the job might be downgraded, because a), if I were confirmed in it, it sure as hell would be downgraded because I wasn't any McGeorge Bundy--that's perfectly clear--certainly not in terms of my public stature, etc., and in other terms as well. I'd like to be as good a man as Mac is and was in an impossible job.

M: You didn't have anything to do with helping select and screen others?

K: I was never asked about who I'd like to see in that job by the President at any time. I remember discussing it with Moyers a couple of times, and Moyers saying he would like to see me in the job. I felt that Moyers would be an excellent man for the job.

M: Did he want to do it?

K: I think he did, at least he indicated that he would be quite sympathetic. He was quite unhappy. By this time he'd acquired a lot of substantive background, and Bill is very quick study. In my judgment Bill Moyers would have been quite happy to have had that job.

M: Let's change tapes.

[End of Tape 1 of 1, Interview III]

INTERVIEW III continued

Tape 2 of 3

M: You discussed in the last tape the indoctrination you got on Viet Nam at the Ranch prior to the long bombing pause at Christmas 1965 when you were there on other affairs. You were about to get a deeper and more thorough indoctrination a few months later. Did you keep in touch with Viet Nam from that, say, December '65 period on, or did you have to come back to it in March when you were made Adviser for Civilian Affairs in Viet Nam?

K: No, I did not stay in touch. I simply happened to be present at that December '65 meeting.

M: It was totally accidental then.

K: Largely accidental, because there was one small but important item I was taken down to the Ranch to handle with the President and McNamara and Rusk. That took about three minutes. All the rest was about the great bombing pause, which I found absolutely fascinating but on which my advice was neither asked nor given--though I will say for the record that I totally agreed with the Bundy-McNamara-Rusk thrust, that this was a "heads, we win; tails, we win, too" proposition, because they kept assuring the President that "if the bombing pause doesn't work, it'll be easy as pie to start bombing again or even intensify it."

I do recall that the only persistent question of LBJ--did I cover this in the--

M: No.

K: The only persistent question from LBJ, which he asked several times, was, "If I do go for this pause, will I run into any problems if I have to turn it on again?"--the bombing--if the gambit fails?" He was assured up and down by Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk--Rusk, I think, loudest of all, "Mr. President, you will have no difficulties. It will justify the whole thing, particularly if you do it for two weeks." Nobody at that time was even talking about thirty-seven days.

I also recall thinking, "My God, what's wrong with the President! He keeps hitting on this issue. Why, of course, the other three are right. I don't know why LBJ can't see this perfectly obvious proposition."

It turned out that Lyndon Johnson was so right and the rest of them, myself as a silent partner included, were so wrong. And if I have heard him refer to that experience once, I have heard him refer to it myself even a dozen times.

M: Never forget it.

K: Never forget, and, boy, did I learn a lesson! He let the pause run for thirty-seven days, and when he turned it back on again, he didn't get a nickel's worth of credit from any domestic audience, from any country, or from anybody, besides which, of course, Hanoi didn't give him the time of day during the entire period. And all the commentary was why didn't he keep it on still longer! That one was an object lesson to me in how advisers who don't have the political instinct can go wrong.

LBJ asked the right question. None of us knew it at the time. And that taught me, as I say, a hell of a lesson.

M: Did you go to Honolulu in February?

K: Negative. Let me finish off on my short period as acting Special Assistant.

M: Yes, I knew that was in March and if you were going to be gone in February, that was going to be tough.

K: The first I knew that I was not going to be put in the Bundy job was when the President called me to his office--I forget the precise day although I certainly recall all of the circumstances--and said to me without any preamble: "You are going to be my special assistant for the Other War in Viet Nam. It is a full-time job, and I am going to pay you top dollar." I remember that top dollar like yesterday because the irrelevance of that--you know, maybe he thought that was important to me. I don't know how he could ever have had that idea, but it was obviously important in his thinking in status terms, that he was going to pay me as much--in fact, I didn't ask him a word about that, but later on I called up Marvin Watson, said: "Marvin, I'm sort of sorting this out. What did he mean by 'I'm going to pay you top dollar?'"

He said, "Bob, that means you're going to get paid as much as I get!"

M: Did he tell you then that Rostow was going to get it?

K: He did not say a word. I did not ask a word. He told me, "From this minute forward, I want you to spend full time on Viet Nam."

I did say, "Mr. President, who's going to mind the store?"

He said, "We'll worry about that." He gave me an equivocal answer. And, as I mentioned earlier, he soon remembered the Indira Gandhi visit, which I had reminded him of at the time. He told me to write my own

charter, and I did. He told me to go see McNamara and Rusk, which I did. He told me to get organized, which I did.

As soon as I got over to see McNamara about an hour or an hour and a half after I had been with the President--my head still reeling because I didn't know which end was up, I showed McNamara a draft directive I had written. He changed only one word--or added only one word, as I recall. I had "I will supervise and coordinate," and he said, "Let's put in direct, supervise and coordinate," or whatever.

But, I said to McNamara that I didn't know anything about Viet Nam (which he well knew); that I figured I'd better get myself educated in a hell of a hurry because I conceived of this job as being quite operational. I was supposed to put the "other war" on the map. My function was not to produce more rhetoric, of which we already had too much, but to produce some results to conform to the rhetoric at the Honolulu conference, among other places.

So I said, "Bob, my sense is that the smartest thing I can do is head right on out to Viet Nam as fast as I can and spend a couple of weeks out there, finding out the score--and from now on, I'd better plan on spending maybe a quarter to a third of my time out there."

I couldn't have said a righter thing to McNamara who, in as many words, said, "If you hadn't told that to me, I was going to tell you. You're absolutely right. You ought to spend as much time as possible out there, because that's where the problem is. I feel so strongly about this that if at any time you need an aircraft, you just talk to Cy Vance or myself and we'll see about getting you a tanker."

So I went to Viet Nam very shortly thereafter.

M: And frequently thereafter.

K: Quite frequently. I forget whether I ever dared mention it to McNamara, but I used to tell others that I went out as often in one year as McNamara had gone out in eight, which really had nothing to do with the price of eggs. Bob would have liked to have gone out even more.

But I was, I think, arriving in Viet Nam when I read in Stars and Stripes, or something, that Walt Rostow had been appointed Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. I did not have an inkling till I was out of the country. I recall being a bit surprised. And as I reconstructed it, it was perfectly clear that the President, in giving me the Viet Nam job, was simultaneously telling me I was not going to be his National Security Affairs fellow. And after all this nonsense about downgrading the job, etc., what he had in mind was trying to trump the Bundy ace and put in somebody who was at least as well known as Bundy.

M: And acceptable to the same people, I presume. Did the thing in the White House change a lot under Rostow? You were there now almost another year, although your job wasn't the same. Was it a whole lot different?

K: Inevitably. The styles of two Presidents are different; the styles of two special assistants are very different. Rostow and McGeorge Bundy are two very different fellows, which is why I responded the way I did. Their constituencies overlapped, but were not entirely

the same by any means. Both of them were indefatigable. My relations had been great with Walt Rostow from '61 on, they had been great with Mac Bundy. Indeed, at times I sort of played a role in the middle between the two of them, because they did not entirely see eye-to-eye on a lot of substantive issues. This was before Mac left.

I greeted Rostow's appointment with enthusiasm--with one reservation: that Walt was more of an enthusiast and less of a cold, hard calculator of odds than Bundy and that he would be more inclined to press his own views than Bundy had been on many issues.

But, you know, that's remembering many years later and I may be unduly influenced. I think what I have told you is accurate, but if I go further it'll be very hard for me to sort out what I see in retrospect in the light of all that has happened since and what I saw then, so let's drop that.

M: When you started in on the Viet Nam thing, you said you were given the charge to write your own charter. Did you make any effort in doing that to keep plugged in to the bigger substantive questions of Viet Nam that did not involve pacification directly, or did you try to carve out a sphere in pacification pretty much exclusive of everything else?

K: Both. Those are not contradictory propositions. On the one hand, I decided right from the outset that I had to keep up with what was going on across-the-board on Viet Nam, except for the negotiating tracks--which were very closely held and which I didn't feel I wanted to know much about because that was really not my business. I was an operator.

M: And that didn't have anything to do with pacification--?

K: It had to do with the war in Viet Nam only insofar as what happened on the negotiating track--if anything developed--might well radically affect our forward planning. But my job was to do something in and on Viet Nam, not on the diplomatic track.

So I didn't even have to insist that I be kept fully clued on what was going on. That came practically automatically. The President included me in almost all the Tuesday lunches where many of the real decisions were made. Any Tuesday lunch where Viet Nam was up, I was almost invariably, although not at all of them, present. Any cabinet meetings etc. that were on anything related to my business in Viet Nam, I was invited. I didn't have to make much of an effort.

Now I do recall one or two times in that year in the White House, calling Walt when I had heard that there was a meeting on and asking, "Am I included." Almost invariably his answer was, "Of course." Maybe on some occasions I was frozen out, but I, looking back, have little to complain about about people keeping me clued on what was going on, and on my being present when important decisions were discussed up to the time I left.

I decided on my own that since the President had told me he wanted me to put the "other war" on the map, he wanted me to add a new dimension in real life to the conflict, to make the reality conform to the rhetoric, if you will. I decided that my ability to do that job, as I saw it shaping up even at the outset would depend on my ability to develop strong and effective managerial ties to my colleagues and to the great bureaucracies; that that job could not be done without first-class relationships with Rostow, with McNamara, with McNaughton, with Rusk, with Bill Bundy, and with all the team

in the field. So I decided very early on that while I was going to make a liberal definition of what the Other War was--and we'll get that in a minute--that by the same token I was not going to root around in the other fellow's cabbage patch any more than I had to because that would get people upset, and that was not really my function. So I stayed completely away from the negotiating track except what Walt told me or what I heard at various meetings. I kept completely away from the air war in the North.

M: The POL bombing?

K: Yes. It became perfectly clear to me that the war was to be won, if it was won, in the South. I was familiar with the controversy already shaping up even then about the effectiveness of the air war. That really was discussed almost more than anything else in the highest councils at that time, and I stayed out of that, except for one or two brief forays into it when my opinion was asked.

It was impossible to separate my Other War from the ground war in South Viet Nam, or from the political developments in South Viet Nam, of a GVN that was responsive to the people, etc, or from the economic aid program, etc. So I gradually branched out.

I notice in your letter that you said I was made Special Assistant for Civilian Affairs in Viet Nam. I do not recall that being the title given. There was no title given. Or if there was, it was very vague. People kept asking me, you know, to define what was my title. I always stayed very much away from that.

I made one mistake. In the directive, NSAM, whatever it was, I wrote "non-military affairs in Viet Nam." I was wrong, because I discovered very early on that the key to the Other War was local

security, and that the guts of local security was pacification. And in order to do the civilian things that needed to be done you had to get local security that the big American battalions, or ARVN, were not providing.

M: That's military, no matter how you look at it.

K: Yes. And that I was then going to have to find some way of generating local security assets.

M: I don't know where I got that title. I think I probably got it from John Leacocos' book.

K: It's a damned good book. But I began getting more and more into the military side of pacification as an indispensible corollary, indeed a prerequisite, to the Other War. And I gradually began shifting my focus from strictly civilian things and strictly civil programs into civil military programs, particularly pacification so that by the time I left for Viet Nam one year later, I was spending 70 percent of my time on pacification and only 30 percent on other aspects of the Other War; whereas, when I first came in for the first three months I was spending, let us say, 70 percent of my time on the Other War in its non-military aspects and only 30 percent on pacification. That was perhaps the biggest lesson that I learned in that first year--well, one of the big lessons.

M: You mentioned the Tuesday luncheons, is it a proper inference that Mr. Johnson paid as direct and detailed personal attention to the, for want of a better term, the non-military aspects, or the Other War, as he did to, say, the bombing targets in the North?

K: No. But not because he didn't want to. The Other War just wasn't of that nature. The constraints on the military bombing were

frequently a day-to-day problem. The President, because of the very nature of those problems, spent a lot more time on them than he did on the Other War. Moreover, I had a different approach--as indeed does Mr. McNamara, and I shared this view with him--that I existed to relieve the President of a number of operating responsibilities which he had delegated to me. My operating style has never been to badger a President. Even when I was a staff officer for Kennedy and Johnson, I didn't feel that I had to go in there every day, or even every week, or keep them constantly bombarded with little memos and this, that, and the other thing--that what Presidents had guys like me around for was to manage some of these things for them, take the issues to them when they needed it, but not to bother them ever after.

I think you'll find, if you ask people like Marvin Watson, for example, about the various special assistants, that Komer sure as hell at least did one thing--he may not have succeeded in his endeavors entirely, but he certainly didn't keep bothering the President. The reason I know this is that Marvin so remarked on more than one occasion. You know, every time I wanted to go see the boss I had no trouble. Others seemed to have a good deal more trouble.

M: Trying more often.

K: I think one of the reasons was they were constantly badgering him and he said to Marvin, you know, "I don't want to see Doug Cater every twenty minutes." I don't blame Doug, he had a very hard--but he just happened to come to mind.

What I have just said must be modified. If you had put the question to me this way, "Was the President as interested in the

Other War as he was in the bombing and the negotiating track, etc.," I would say unquestionably "yes". I never at any time had any sense that there was a lack of presidential interest in pacification, the Other War dimension, etc.

Nor did I find any lack of interest whatsoever in my strongest ally in government, who I later discovered had been one of the two who had recommended me for this job, Robert McNamara. His operational interest and willingness to help out on the Other War and pacification was just great. I did find considerable disinterest, may I say, in the Department of State.

M: State, not Defense?

K: Interesting, isn't it?

M: Yes, I would have thought that some of the agencies in Defense, maybe--?

K: Yes. Operationally I was getting more assets from Defense than I was getting from the civilian agencies.

M: Did you have a substantive opposition, or was it operational?

K: Who?

M: State.

K: There was no opposition. I didn't say that. I said, "lack of interest." We were on the subject, "Was the President as interested in the Other War as he was the big unit war, the air war." My answer is he was just as interested in my war, or the part he had given me. He had a very good feel for its importance. So did McNamara, and he was operationally much involved. So were AID and CIA. The only place I can point to where there was sort of a surprising lack of interest in the Other War and what I was up to, would be State.

M: But it didn't come from opposition?

K: No. In no sense opposition. Indeed, I had great sympathy from the Secretary of State, and I have no sense of ever having run into any problems with Mr. Rusk--or with Bill Bundy who was his chief operator in the field. I ran into a fair amount of bureaucratic backflap down below in the younger group. But that was sort of unimportant to me because I was put in to ride over that sort of thing. It's just in terms of operational interest. But of course Bill was up to his ears with the purely political and negotiating track, etc. So I'm not being unduly critical. I am being slightly critical.

Now, let me go back and add an important point. Why Komer on Viet Nam? Here was a presidential judgment. I did not know but discovered only later that there had been a big controversy over how the management of the so-called Other War should be handled in Washington. Here we get back to Honolulu, February '66. There had been (it's confirmed by the Pentagon Papers) a lot of complaint about we weren't managing this war right, particularly the civil side. This led first to the Warrenton Conference in January '66 where a lot of second-level guys got together and pinpointed the lack of movement on what they called the pacification side and the lack of organization in Saigon, but also in Washington. After that came Honolulu. Apparently some

decisions were taken at Honolulu that they'd better jack up the management. This led directly the appointment of Bill Porter, newly assigned number two in Saigon, to be the Mr. Pacification.

M: In the field.

K: In the field. Something which never panned out for complicated reasons that we needn't get into here. It also led apparently to focus on the need for a Washington back-up. This had been mentioned briefly in the Warrenton report, but it probably had been dealt with primarily at a high level.

I understand that there was a great controversy over whether the Washington back-up should be in the form of a special assistant and staff under the Secretary of State or should be lodged in the White House. McNamara and Bundy both strongly recommended that it must be in the White House because the responsibilities were interagency in nature and that could not bedone by State effectively.

I believe that McNamara and Bundy also recommended that I be actively considered for that job on the basis of my performance as a doer and as a manager.

M: As a manager--

K: Yes. But up to that point I hadn't been a manager either. My experience was as a staff officer. I'd been involved in--

M: A doer.

K: A doer, if you will, but not a manager. Interesting. Up to that point I'd never managed anything bigger than a platoon or the National Estimate Staff of twenty people in CIA. But the State Department, expecting to get the job, had done a detailed TO&E for a big office with sixty-nine people in it.

M: In Washington?

K: In Washington. When I went over to see Mr. Rusk, he said, "You know, we had hoped this job would come over here, but the President decided otherwise, and I'm perfectly happy about this, Bob." He was great about it. He said, "But, you know, we've done up a sort of a scheme of the kind of staff you're going to need because you're going to need a big operational staff drawn from the various agencies, and you tell Bill Bundy to give it to you."

I didn't have to remind Bill because the first thing he said to me was, "We've got this black book with all the wiring diagrams, organization charts. You're going to need at least sixty-nine people, etc."

From my experience in the White House, I felt that if you build up that big a staff, you'll spend all your time managing your staff rather than managing the Other War. So I checked the bet on it. I never built up a staff of more than six professionals and a total of maybe a dozen people during my entire year in Washington. But that's yet another story.

At any rate, I think it was McNamara and Mac Bundy who recommended me for this job. I can't sort out yet--I've never asked Mac whether he was recommending me for this job if I didn't get the other job, or recommending me for the other job first, etc. But I'm sure it must have been the other job first because he would not have told me that he was unless he had been.

The next point that's important is why did Lyndon Johnson pick me. Well, I was a tabula rasa on Viet Nam. I had never even been to the Far East before, and that was the first thing I told him when

he said, "You're going to be my other warrior on Viet Nam." As I recall he said something like this: "Bob, I've had an awful lot of experts working on this problem for a long time, and we don't seem to be getting anywhere very fast. So, maybe it's a good idea to have a few fresh cooks stirring the pot." And I recall thinking at that time that that was a hard argument to answer.

M: That takes out all the range of not knowing, not caring, no experience.

K: At any rate, I assumed that I was chosen--because I didn't do much looking back, there wasn't much time to go back and find out whys and wherefores-- because of my general reputation as a guy who could get things done with the Washington bureaucracy.

I discovered in my year in Washington in the job that I could master the Washington bureaucracy, but that it was not my problem. The problem was with that dirty little war 10,000 miles away and our people in Saigon who were inadequate, and in my judgment incompetent, at really putting the Other War on the map. And the reason why they were inadequate and incompetent resided largely in a GVN through which we were working and which had to carry the laboring oar, which it was utterly incapable of doing.

This leads up to the reasons why I ended up recommending some radical reworking, not in Washington but in Saigon. For my pains, again utterly unpremeditated, I ended up being the guy who invented a better mousetrap and was sent out to make it work.

M: Again, in all of this, talking about why it wasn't working in Saigon, you mentioned nobody really being not enthusiastic about the Other War, but simply being incapable of doing it. Is that a proper inference, that you didn't find a lot of opposition from, say, the military or the mission or the GVN personnel, simply an inefficiency or an

incapability?

K: Yes. Everybody paid lip service to this being a political conflict, a revolutionary war; to its civil dimension being at least as important as its military dimension; to the need for a pacification program; for helping the farmers and the countryside; for providing local security; for this, that, and the other. All this was a lot more than rhetoric. I believe the policy makers meant it when they put all of this policy (as well as rhetorical) emphasis, on this civil or political or whatever you went to call it dimension of the war. I discovered very quickly--and here being a tabula rasa may have been quite advantageous. It showed maybe the President was a lot shrewder than I thought he was at the time in picking a tabula rasa--that there was an immense gap between policy and performance.

I can discourse more articulately on this now because I've been studying it for the past two years since I came back from Turkey. But I think that my performance and my memoranda and everything else while I was in Washington demonstrate that, though I didn't articulate it the same way, I was zeroing in on exactly the same problem--that managerially we were not set up to give the civil side of the war the run that it deserved,and that, therefore, the policy was simply not being carried out.

M: You had no trouble making this discovery? I take it that means that once you tried to get the information, that part was easy enough.

K: I'll say this for everybody--I don't kid myself. They set the job up right for once. Being at the President's elbow, having a direct grant of authority from him, having the active support of the Secretary of State and Defense directly, going out to Saigon as the

presidential Special Assistant--let's call it "Lyndon Johnson's boy." It made information available; it resulted in a degree of responsiveness that was more than satisfactory. That was not the problem.

The problem was the way in which a whole set of institutional constraints, bureaucratic difficulties, etc., made it very hard for the agencies to be as responsive as their top management wanted them to be, and made it impossible for that mess out in Saigon--Vietnamese and American--to do what they said they were going to do and meant, and to do what I wanted them to do.

M: But you were able accurately to see that out there. They weren't able to conceal it from you once you were there on the ground--or didn't try.

K: No. This is the old business about brainwashing, etc. Sure, they tried. Sure, there were guys right on up to--you know, there were times when Cabot Lodge didn't level with me. There were times when Westmoreland didn't level with me. Most of the time the GVN--Thieu, Ky, etc.--didn't reveal their whole hand to the Americans. I would say that all of these people, however, revealed more to me than they would have to most others, partly because of my presidential backing. Bureaucrats, foreign or domestic, are just very careful about being caught out misinforming a presidential staffer.

Second, I studied to establish the best possible personal relationships with everybody. Lodge, Westmoreland, Ky, Thieu, McNamara, Rusk, the works. I knew most of them back here already, and those out there, as I say, I met in eight visits very quickly.

Third, I had an invaluable window on to what was really going

on through Bill Porter and his staff. Porter may not have performed very effectively in an impossible role out there, but he was a very very able outspoken analyst and he and I were good friends. I'm sorry to say we were probably better friends when I first took over--and he had just really taken over--than we were at the end when after a year of beating him up--very frustrating to both him him and me--he was pretty unhappy, though he never showed it. Well he did show it, which is the measure of the man. I was grateful that he did.

So I had my company spies in Saigon, in Porter's outfit, who were just about as able a group as you would ever find in Viet Nam--surely a hell of a lot more knowledgeable than the best people in the press.

Lastly, being a tabula rasa on Viet Nam, I naturally went out to find myself a few guys on my personal staff who could make up for my lack of knowledge. And instead of picking up sixty-nine bureaucrats, I went first for my deputy, Bill Leonhart, an ambassador from State whom I knew well, who had served in Viet Nam briefly, very knowledgeable, to be my link with State. Porter urged me to pick up his special assistant, and Lodge's--a very bright young FSO who had served as an adviser down in the districts, Holbrooke; an exceedingly able lieutenant colonel whom Holbrooke put me onto by the name of Robert Montague, one of the outstanding young officers in the U.S. Army. Then I got a couple of very bright guys from RAND, both of whom had spent plenty of time dealing with Southeast Asia in general and Viet Nam in particular, Chuck Cooper, now the number one economic guy out there, and Dick Moorsteen, the China hand. So I had a first-class staff. These guys knew all the interesting Americans and Vietnamese.

So I would say that my little office was better plugged into what was really going on in Viet Nam than anybody else in Washington, including the President because he was too high up and filtered through; including McNamara because he was too busy on a whole series of other things; and certainly including the boys in State.

The only ones you could argue about were the boys in the [Central Intelligence] Agency like George Carver, etc. They may have been more knowledgeable than my crew and I on what was happening, especially on the enemy side. But they were far less knowledgeable than I,because they didn't focus on this aspect, on what the difficulties and problems were in making our programs work. One of the things I found out was that nobody was focusing on the management of the war--nobody!

M: How did it happen that in the light of that that you were able to issue so frequently reasonably optimistic statements when you returned from these numerous trips, for instance, '66?

K: You're supposed to be a historian, Mulhollan. Reasonably optimistic statements every time I returned from these trips? I think if you'll look at it--

M: Guardedly optimistic--.

K: All right. But even so, I didn't do it after every trip. I may have done it after two or three of eight trips.

I'll plead guilty to the sin, if you will, of over-optimism. After all, I first began to be a Vietnamese in April 1966. The silliest thing I did was the Komer Report of September 1966, because while I will insist that what I said in the Komer Report was valid --in fact 100 percent of what I said on the positive side was

straight from the Embassy, not invented by Komer--it did give a distorted picture.

The Komer Report gave a distorted impression because the field quite naturally (and I following through) focused on the positive things we were doing without putting them in the context of all the counterproductive and unpleasant things that were happening in the military war. Thus the Komer Report, appearing all by itself, suggested, "Boy, oh boy, everything's going swimmingly out there," when all that one could really argue was that everything might be going pretty well in the group of relatively minor areas covered in the Report. But when you put those in the pot with all the rest of what's going on, it sure as hell doesn't look that way.

So the press jumped on me, and there was the beginning of my credibility gap right off, and said, "Look, here's another super-optimist." That reaction had relatively little to do with what was in the Komer Report. It had a great deal to do with the by-then galloping disenchantment with what all top officials had been saying up to that time. I was a victim of "McNamara's folly," if you will, or "LBJ's folly." I really was the last guy to come along.

Let me add this: we didn't have time to send the Komer Report out to Saigon. None of the press had it out there. When I gave it to LBJ and he said, "Hey, this is interesting, publish it,"--and indeed I suggested to him that maybe this was something we ought to get out in some form--and it came out, he had me brief the press there in the White House. Well, these guys were not very knowledgeable about Viet Nam, so they took it at face value. Indeed, I had meant it at face value. I wasn't trying deliberately to play it all up,

although I'll get to that in a second. There was a certain amount of that.

But, we got good press in the United States from the Washington press corps. Then their stories hit Saigon, where none of the Saigon press corps had the Komer Report. And immediately the nasty cracks and slants etc. began to come back. You can go back to the papers and look at them in September 1966. You'll see that these guys in Saigon are saying, "Oh, Christ, it doesn't matter how many schools are built; most of them get knocked down; half of them are built of sand instead of cement anyway. Komer's full of bull like everybody else."

There was my built-in credibility gap. And the guys in the Saigon press corps had never seen the Komer Report, and I am sure that 90 percent of them who commented adversely on it haven't read it to this day because I wrote a careful preface and a careful epilogue etc.

But all things considered, it was a grievous error, because I thought then that these things were more important than they were. After all, I had been told to put the Other War on the map, and like a good soldier, I regarded the Other War as important. Like a naive fellow, I thought that how many wells we had dug and how many refugees we'd taken care of and how many schools we'd built and teachers trained and all that stuff, and what we'd done about cleaning up Saigon port, and devaluation, etc,; keeping inflation under control --and all of this, was really basic. Some of it was more basic than the rest of it, but all in all, it was a credulous, naive performance on my part.

Let's go beyond that to my general public stance pre-Tet 1968, in particular. I forget where others have said it, but I too never heard of an establishmentarian who is supposed to be building up operating programs, who is supposed to be strengthening the morale of the troops, who is supposed to be bidding for a bigger share of the pie to get the Other War going--I never heard of a guy who in the middle of a war, in particular, is going to be going out and from his position as a staff officer to the President, saying: "Jesus, this is a mess. This war stinks. These programs are no good. Everybody is incompetent, etc." You can sure as hell see in my private memoranda to the President, to the field, and to everybody else that I was under damned few illusions--I shouldn't say damned few, I had some illusions which I shed later. But the public face you put on is a brave face. After all, I was trying to get more support and more resources. I was told to put the Other War on the map, and I didn't realize that talking up the morale of the troops and talking up your program would be counterproductive rather than productive. It turned out to be counterproductive, but the reasons are to be found far more in the general Viet Nam malaise, which was at that time creeping up over everybody--the public as well as the officialdom--than in my own. I regard myself in that respect as largely a victim rather than an actor.

Then we could get on to the second big thing that people talk about. In November '67 Westmoreland and Bunker came back, as did I --I bummed a ride back. I'm sometimes included with them in saying falsely, "It looks at the end of '67 as though we're drawing ahead." Westy gave the National Press Club speech on "light at the end of the

tunnel."

I will argue, and history will bear me out even though I sound like Walt Rostow in saying so, that we were correct in our optimism at that time and that the greatest proof of it was that Hanoi thought we were winning the war, too. Otherwise, why had Hanoi decided several months earlier on so radical a change in the strategy it had pursued since 1946? And this radical shift, of course resulted in the TET offensive. You don't change a winning strategy! The command in Hanoi totally turned around the way they fought the war, and, boy, did they catch us with our pants down, even more than we got caught at the Battle of the Bulge, which was Westy's analogy and all things considered, not all that bad a one. So I've always argued--nobody's listening yet although I notice Walt Rostow, to whom I first expressed this, has it in U.S. News and World Report--but I think I'm right and Walt got it from me.

M: There's no question that in the private councils the President and other high principals were being given reasonably accurate information through '66 and '67 about the genuine problems that existed and the difficulties that were going on with the other war, and with the regular war too?

K: A good question. You're wise to come back to it, and my answer is "yes" and "no". At the risk of being slightly parochial, I will say that I was giving, I thought, a more accurate picture of a key dimension of the war than were many others and that this dimension, this so-called Other War or, as it became, pacification, etc. was getting the short end of the stick. It was not being adequately handled; we didn't have the right kind of leadership in Saigon-

--Vietnamese or American, etc.--and there were plenty of operational problems. You go back and you can read--they're all down at the Johnson library--you read all of my things and you'll see that I sure as hell was talking about problems as well as prospects.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that from '66 on I was reasonably hopeful about the outcome of the war. I did not take adequately into account the possibility of a Tet offensive--nobody else did either, nobody, and I mean nobody. I was over-optimistic on several important things that in hindsight I wish I hadn't been so optimistic on.

I think we were winning the war, as I say, at the end of '67. I think that if we had stayed on the same track--leaving out the bombing suspension of LBJ's at the end of March '68--I think if Nixon had kpet after it more we would have done better. I point out that after three years of Mr. Nixon we sure as hell haven't lost the war the way Dan Ellsberg said we were going to lose it within two months after TET 1968.

So the verdict of history on this may be that we haven't done all that badly. The historians will say later on--they won't say it now of course--that it was the investment made by LBJ that would permit Mr. Nixon to withdraw and to insure Saigon's survival in recognizable form simultaneously.

So here we get onto a very big and complex issue, and I'm trying to give you an honest answer. Looked back in retrospect, I wish I had emphasized various problems more heavily than I did. I wish I had pushed harder for various things than I did. And I wish I had--

[End of Tape 2 of 3, Interview III]

INTERVIEW III continued

Tape 3 of 3, Side 1

M: You were saying that you wished you had emphasized certain problems more strongly and pushed harder for certain solutions that you later thought were more important but essentially thought that there'd been kind of a duality of optimism and pessimism that probably came through.

K: Any man in his right mind who, looking back on Viet Nam, says he did perfectly, or even did well, has rocks in his head. And that, I'm sorry to say, applies to Presidents as well as lesser lights. But it's easier for lesser lights to confess error, and, indeed, I'm not even sure Presidents should.

That said, and recognizing the many failures of degree or kind with which I was associated, I nevertheless would argue that the Other War and pacification, which we started getting revved up in 1966 in Washington though not in the field, that the program which the President finally sent me out to run in '67 after I had redesigned it personally, that the things we have done in pacification and the Other War since are among the few half-way bright pages of an otherwise tragic overcommitment in Viet Nam. I think that will be history's verdict. I may be unduly parochial in saying so, but I think that my part of the war--and when I say "my," I mean all the people who backed me and joined me, etc.--have less to apologize for than almost anybody else.

I was called in as a second-level play doctor long after the basic decisions had been taken, and we were committed. I think the larger advice I gave to the President gave me a batting average of maybe .500, which puts me in the really big leagues in anybody's ball game and ahead of most on Viet Nam.

Now, several qualifiers to that. It was much easier to bat .500 by '66-'67-'68 than it had been in '55 to '65. The die was cast by then, and many were coming around to recognize, not least the President and the Secretary of Defense.

M: You're leaving out the Secretary of State?

K: I left out the Secretary of State--and don't ask questions like that.

M: I'm supposed to ask questions like that.

K: I don't want to--we'll edit that out. Points of omission are frequently as indicative as points of commission.

Second, I could not have accomplished what I think we did accomplish in this field without the wholehearted support at every juncture of Lyndon Johnson, and, second, Bob McNamara, and, third, Walt Rostow. I have no real complaint about the support I was given by my bosses or my colleagues in 1966-67. I have considerable feeling that just when Pacification was rounding into form and beginning to prove itself, a vast lassitude settled on Washington after TET 1968.

M: This was also about the time you were no longer--

K: No, I was there until November.

M: That late?

K: And before I left we ran the turn-around campaign, which was personally designed by me--the first accelerated Pacification campaign beginning in November 1968 and running through February '69, which was the big

turn-around. Everything that has happened since to me justifies the quite modest investment, proportionately, that we put into the Other War and Pacification. So, I've got no complaints over the support I was given. I could not have accomplished--we could not have accomplished what we did in this field without it, and I used it to the hilt.

I would also note that my support dropped off along with everybody else's support after the President had in effect quasi-abdicated, after Mr. McNamara had left the Defense Department and his successor and the people in ISA who were my strongest allies, were just no longer interested in the war or in Pacification.

Mr. Clifford's aim was quite different, a quite legitimate one. But when he was gung ho for disengagement and winding the war down, he was not interested in providing positive support to programs that might be going up because they were sort of irrelevant in his way of looking at things--and I am not being critical. I'm simply stating a fact of life.

Third, we did well because we handled things in the Other War and Pacification quite differently from every other aspect of the Viet Nam war from '66 on. I was the only single manager in Washington working full time on Viet Nam above the rank of colonel. You might not believe it, but I told the President twice that I was the only senior official in Washington above the rank of colonel or GS-15 who was working full time on Viet Nam and that this was a sad way to deal with a major war.

Now, there is no question that people like the President, McNamara, or Rusk, Bundy, Rostow, spent one hell of a lot of time on the Viet Nam war. If anything, they spent more time on its detail than they

should have. That was partly because we never oganized to manage properly what Phil Geyelin called the "orphan war." This was one of the great flaws, and I was one of the few people who put their finger on it and one of the few who tried to do something about it.

In that category one should include my proposal to the President for a war cabinet, composed of subcabinet officials which he approved. The psychological moment we chose to put that in was when he brought Nick Katzenbach over to be Under Secretary of State because I knew if we were ever going to have a subcabinet war cabinet to meet once or twice a week and really prepare things for the Tuesday luncheon. etc., instead of having them done in the incredibly unstructured way that they were in Washington, we had to have an impartial chairman who was not already committed to the air war this way or that way. Nick Katzenbach, as a new boy, was ideal. So that was a Komer proposal and it should be examined because the President was for it. All he asked, again, was that it be invisible, and we successfully--

M: Is that the non-committee?

K: That's the non-group. I coined the phrase, the "non-group." It consisted initially of Katzenbach, Vance, Rostow, and Komer.

M: It ultimately got bigger than that--

K: As usual, and less effective.

The second thing I did was to make clear to the President and McNamara and Rusk increasingly that the way we were organized in Saigon made it very difficult to really push the Other War cum Pacification. I was the originator of the recommendation in September 1966 that it be put under the military.

There's a long and complex history to that, but coming back from my August trip to Viet Nam I wrote a memo saying there were three options: put it all under the military; put it all under the civilians; continue the same thing. I wrote this very blandly, but when I wrote it and sent it to the President (and, as was my policy, to McNamara and Rusk at the same time; and Rostow), I told Bob McNamara and John McNaughton privately that I had come to the view that the only people who could put pacification on the map were the military --American and Vietnamese--because the military were the only ones who know how to organize major programs and carry them out and that the military, at the same time, were the ones who were not paying any attention to pacification, and if they didn't, it wasn't going to go anywhere as long as it was run by the civilians. The civilians knew what was needed to be done and were utterly incapable of doing it. The military weren't doing what needed to be done but were capable of doing it--

M: Just put it together and let somebody run it who knew how--

K: So McNamara agreed that he would be the stalking horse on this. And he sat down and wrote the memo with support from me and my staff recommending that it be put under the military. This was resisted strongly by--

M: Was this one of the troubles with Bill Porter?

K: Yes. It was resisted strongly by all the civilian agencies and vigorously by our mission in Saigon. The upshot was the creation of OCO, but even prior to that the President had indicated to McNamara and to me that he didn't think OCO would work. We had told him we sure as hell didn't think it would work, but he was going

to do it in two steps rather than in one step. This was the origin of the famous ninety to a hundred and twenty days to prove itself. Now, I knew as well as anybody else that no organization like that could prove itself in ninety to a hundred and twenty days. Indeed, I made the point to the President, and it was his sort of brushing aside that obvious point that confirmed to me again that he meant it when he said to me, "We're going to go in that direction. Just wait for a time."

But we didn't have time. And in a sense, there again was LBJ thinking politically rather than managerially. But I am not to this day prepared to contest the President's judgment as to what the traffic would bear.

M: So the change to the military command--

K: That was phase two.

M: --was not a part of your decision to go out there?

K: No, it was really made long before, but only privately. For example, in the Pentagon Papers--

M: This had already happened when you went there.

K: Yes. It doesn't even appear in the Pentagon Papers that this decision was made earlier. Of course the guy who wrote that particular thing is being a little cute because he was my special assistant and I think he knows, though I kept this from him because he was from the State Department, and I didn't want him carrying tales. I thought he was loyal to me, but I didn't want that. Anyway, I kept my private business with the President as private as I could.

But this led to the delayed creation of OCO, and to the third

attempt to give Porter full responsibility and put him full time on pacification. It didn't work any better than I had, by this time, judged that it would. Then we took the next phase, and the President decided--I again recommended--that it be put under the military. And this time he said, "Yes." McNamara of course again recommended it, too. In fact, if I recall--the sequence is not too firm in my mind anymore, but I think that the President really jumped us, that we didn't have to tell him the ninety days were over etc.; that really before the ninety days were over, Guam came along, and in getting ready for Guam he sort of made the decision. And, in the process of making the decision, he decided that I was to be the fall guy; that Westmoreland was to be given the responsibility on the American side, and he was to be given a civilian deputy to run the thing for him, and that I was to be it. They told me this at Guam.

M: There was one big conference before that in '66. Did you go to Manila?

K: Oh yes. I was at all the conferences after April '66.

M: About the Manila conference, were you close enough to watch the President in his operation with the other chiefs of state there? How much insight can you go into on that?

K: A six-ring circus.

M: Twice a Barnum & Bailey, huh? He's good as a personal diplomat?

K: Oh yes. He overwhelmed them. After all, they were satellite kings. It was like the Emperor of China with--

M: Any concrete accomplishments in a situation like that, or was it mainly just--?

K: Those conferences are not run for concrete accomplishments in the

sense of they get together and decide what they're going to do, because the others who were there, except for the Vietnamese and ourselves, really were not major actors. Only the Koreans made a substantial contribution. You don't get six countries together, even six countries that speak the same language, and sort of thrash out policy. This was the usual bunch of progress reports, etc.

But LBJ, as always, did his best work in the back room, and he had some good talks with Thieu and Ky--Ky in particular.

And of course as usual, pacification and the Other War were hardly discussed in the progress reports except by LBJ himself who asked me at the last minute to write big chunks of his speech--which, incidentally, were given practically unchanged by the boss, so there was no doubt as to who was handling the Other War.

Then, at the end we got some other good things out in the communique. Most of all, we firmed up the commitment Ky had made, to me among others, that he would put 50 percent of the ARVN battalions in support of pacification, which was the first time we had gotten really substantial military assets allocated to local security.

This, again, has a long and checkered operational history, but that was more or less settled before, except nobody knew about it outside the inner circle so that when this came out at Manila, and publicly signing them on, that was a big plus as far as I was concerned. Otherwise, except for the Johnson gambit "we'll get out in six months"--

M: Did you have any input into that communique?

K: Yes, I had a lot of input into the communique, but nothing into that particular issue which part of the negotiating track which I was staying out of.

M: So that was from another angle.

K: Check. I said earlier that one of my basic operational principles was to stick to my last. It was one of the secrets of such success as I had in running the Other War, first in Washington and then in Saigon. There were, however, a few times when I got over into other people's parts of the war.

This was sort of semi-automatic when I was asked for my view at the Tuesday lunch or out in Saigon at Bunker's weekly meeting, or at Westy's meetings, etc., what I thought. You can't avoid it. Indeed, I don't want to suggest that I was any shrinking violet. I probably messed around more in other people's business than most. Indeed, I was told on a couple of occasions by Mr. McNamara that he was backing me 100 percent on my war, but he wished I would keep my nose out of his war. Thereby hangs an important tale.

I felt very strongly, as I got into the matter, that we were not organized to run the Viet Nam conflict very satisfactorily. You can see this from what I've been saying. Here I was, the only single manager in Washington of a piece of the action, and I was the only guy who ever designed things so that in Saigon too we had a single manager of a piece of the action, at least of the U.S. side of the action.

One of the reasons that the war was not going well was that whatever we decided was policy in Washington, it was not being very well carried out by the Americans in Viet Nam, and, through the Americans,

not being carried out at all really by the Vietnamese. As a guy who had all of a sudden become a manager who was dealing with hundreds of millions of dollars worth of assets, even though mostly in plasters, as a guy who was trying to make policy, translate policy into program, and translate program into performance involving literally hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and 10,000 Americans, I became quite acutely concerned about the way we were organized to deal with this situation.

Let me backtrack and say I was one, a win-the-war-in-the-South man, not a bomb-the-North-into-submission man. I was, two, a believer in the political, or pacification, dimension of the war as being the key to success; that if we couldn't stop the NVA from coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail but could snuff out or even cripple the Viet Cong--the indigenous revolutionists--why should Hanoi keep sending men down the trail!

This led me also to conclude that the first priority area should be the Delta and not up north, and that the first priority program should be pacification and not the big unit war, and that the important thing was to get the Vietnamese off their butts and working, not to keep throwing in American forces. All this coalesced in connection with what this fellow from the Washington Star, Orr said, that when they were able to gain some perspective historians are likely to find that the month of April '67 was a much more significant turning point in the American war effort than the post-Tet decision not to give

Westmoreland any more men except a pittance.

LBJ really decided to put a ceiling on the war in April '67 when Westmoreland requested 200,000 more men. The reason I raise this is that both at that time and earlier I had said, "We don't need to send any more Americans to Viet Nam; that's not the way to handle this thing. Instead, we need two things: one, to get the Vietnamese to carry their burden; and, two, to change our strategy, to put much greater emphasis on pacification." You couldn't do without the big unit war, it was a shield for pacification, but it was a question of balance. And the balance at the time was 95-5. I thought maybe a balance a little bit more like 70-30 would be all we needed. So I became very actively involved in questions of the high strategy of the war insofar as I was constantly plugging for more Vietnamization and, above all, more emphasis on pacification, on the political dimension of the war, etc.

This got me into questions of war resource allocation and into questions of war management. And I twice in my reports to the President--the first time I think in August '66--recommended that we should seriously consider unified command. My view was that the Vietnamese performance was miserable, and that the chief reason why Vietnamese Army and civilian performance was miserable was lousy leadership and that if we Americans were paying the price for the war in blood as well as treasure, we damned well could insist that the Vietnamese get rid of the incompetent, the corrupt, etc., far more than they were. Let me say that in my field, pacification, where my word was law, we did it. And I didn't go back and ask anybody

for permission.

M: You simply unified it period.

K: I not only unified it, but we got our Vietnamese to fire a lot of incompetents--province chiefs, district chiefs, officials of all kind. This led me to conclude that the only way we were going to really get a handle on the Vietnamese side of the war was to have some kind of unified command. Put Americans in charge as Ridgeway had been in Korea, when Ridgeway could fire incompetent ROK (Republic of Korea) generals because he was the commander.

Now McNamara had considered this; Westmoreland had indeed at one time proposed it back before Westy became a U.S. Army commander, when he was still just the MAAG chief, in effect. As soon as Westy got an American army, he lost interest. And you know, there are plenty of arguments pro and con, but I made a strong recommendation in August 1966 in my trip report to the President.

The next thing I knew I had a telephone call, and I lifted up my phone and it was Mr. McNamara. It wasn't his secretary; it was McNamara himself. The first time it had ever happened, you know, I pick up the phone and he's on the line. And he was boiling. I had sent him a copy--you know I was a little naive at this point--I was a new boy; I had been in business six months--and I didn't realize that I was really getting him unhappy.

He said, "What the hell do you mean recommending a unified command! Since when is that your business?" Then is when he told me, he said: "I've been giving you 100 percent support, I've told you anything you can ask for and justify I'll back you on. But I want you to run your war, not run my war. I don't think a unified

command--"

Then when he calmed down a little bit, he said, "You know, I recommended this once before and they turned me down. Westmoreland didn't want it. He gave me the reasons and I backed Westmoreland then and I back him now. Keep your nose out of my war."

M: A good lesson for a new boy.

K: "Yes, sir, Bob. Yes, sir, yes sir, yes, sir!"

Well, I again orally mentioned it on a couple of occasions, and I sort of tried to encourage Rostow, but it was clear that if I ever raised that issue again formally, after Bob McNamara had put me on notice, I had a problem.

I mentioned it again, and he did not object, in my final April 1967 memo to the President, as I was leaving for Viet Nam, on "how to win the war." And I still think that it's a better memo than any other top adviser wrote the President at any time in terms of operational recommendations for how you do it, with whom, to what, to whom, with what.

M: On the subject about which it was written and not a broader subject with which it might have dealt.

K: Yes. Or on what the policy ought to be or what's wrong--I got into that too. The Pentagon Papers are full of analyses and policy prescriptions and this, that, and the other thing, but they are notably lacking not just in the White House dimension, but in what the hell was going on in the field. They're written from the DOD point of view, and you can't tell from them anymore than what Saigon was telling the field and a few commentaries on whether it was right or wrong.

There has been nothing written yet on where we really went wrong in Viet Nam, and that is that we were unable to carry out, for many reasons I won't go into, the policy that we had set. Now, it may have been a bad policy, I'm not arguing that one way or the other, I am arguing that whatever the policy--and in many respects it was not all that bad--the policy was not adequately carried out by our people in the field from top to bottom.

Maybe it couldn't be carried out. That deserves examination. To a considerable extent the ones who have lost the war, if it's lost, have been the South Vietnamese, whom all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put on top. But in another real sense, we could have done a hell of a lot better than we did out there, and part of the proof of the pudding is in the fact that we finally got around to doing it in pacification, in terms of building democratic institutions, in terms of improving GVN effectiveness, and even in terms of fighting the big unit war somewhat more effectively.

So that we find today, even though 65 percent of the American troops have come home from Viet Nam--or more than that--that we're in a better position than we've ever been before. It may just be short term. I don't think so. At any rate, that's not what we were talking about.

I did make several major recommendations which I think stand the test of time far better than other recommendations on how we should organize and allocate our effort in South Vietn Nam in civilian, military, political, economic, etc., spheres. Those recommendations were made to the President. Where I was able to carry out those recommendations, I did--and I think with reasonable

success, given what we put into it.

But on the larger thing, to this day I think we have not brought around our resource allocation and our performance into line with our policy. Mr. Nixon, after three years, has not succeeded much more than Mr. Johnson did, even though Mr. Nixon's policy is not all that bad--nor was Mr. Johnson's, in my humble opinion, all that bad. This is entirely apart from the question of whether we should have intervened.

I know Mr. Johnson will never say a word on this subject, but I am as sure as I am sitting here that if somehow he could give a private answer to the question of "Knowing what you know now, Mr. President, would you ever have gone into Viet Nam," Christ, he would have thrown the questioner out of the office! Of course not!

But, you know, it is not given to any of us, even Presidents, even Lyndon Johnson, to know in advance what history's wheel will bring.

M: Did changing your effort in your war to the military command at the time you went out there do what you hoped it would do?

K: It worked out, and most people will admit it in hindsight. It worked out even better than we had dreamed. In that one respect, hanging this millstone around the military's neck was precisely what was needed to make the military take pacification serously.

We didn't kid Westmoreland one bit. He knew damned well what we were doing to him. Lyndon Johnson covered it over, and I thought his handling of Westy was very good. I covered it over; Bunker covered it over; but we all knew that Westy knew what we were doing.

And Westy indeed connived with us because it was not his people,

it was he himself who made the military support of pacification work when we created CORDS. The MACV staff couldn't stand it; the commanders in the field were unhappy, etc. Westmoreland personally helped put pacification on the map on the American side.

I would say that he and I had more to do with it than everybody else put together on the American side, and almost as much as one man on the Vietnamese side, and that was Nguyen Van Thieu. It turned out that the guy who got elected President, again by what appears in hindsight as sort of a fluke decision of the generals to back him instead of Ky, turned out to be the only really pacification-oriented senior general in the Vietnamese Army, with the exception of Thang.

(Interruption)

M: So when you came back in November '67 you had genuine cause for a fair amount of optimism at that meeting with the President--when all of you came back. Did you meet with the so-called "Wise Men" that assembled that month, the same group that met again in March of '68 while you were back here? The senior civilians and--?

K: Negative. Was there a meeting in November of '67?

M: Yes.

K: I don't recall. Maybe I did. I remember a meeting at which Clark Clifford was, but I attended so many meetings--

M: He was probably Secretary of Defense-designate by then, wasn't he?

K: Yes. So maybe he was in for that reason. I don't remember a meeting with Mac Bundy, so I probably did not meet with the "Wise Men." You

see, I was not really back officially. I was really back on leave, taking advantage of the fact that Bunker or Westy was coming back in a plane and then turning around and going back out so I could get a few days with my family. Remember, we were all alone out there. None of us had our families with us.

M: The October elections had just ended. Did those things serve any more than cosmetic value?

K: Yes, I think they did. I think that if South Viet Nam survives it is going to be shown that the political process largely pressed forward by the Americans--well, in a sense, you can take it all the way back to 1965 and the abdication of Bao Dai and the American support of Ngo Dinh Diem and what went back and forth at that time. But the present phase really began in '66 when as an outgrowth of the Buddhist crisis we got Ky to promise a constituent assembly. Lo and behold, they appointed it right after he had successfully resolved the Buddhist crisis in I Corps.

The assembly reported in the fall of '66, and we had a constitutional convention. It was a constituent assembly; it was elected. It came forth with a constitution, and the constitution was put into effect. There was a national election, which did create tripartite division of power with an independent assembly, and a quasi-independent judiciary.

And while the national election fiasco of October 1971 sort of casts a pall on it, it bothers me that all the rest that has been accomplished and is still extant is ignored by the media and the critics who focus just on this one thing, which admittedly was a fiasco. I don't think Thieu got any 94 percent of the 88 percent of the people voting, nor the man in the moon either.

Nonetheless, I think a great deal has been accomplished. How lasting it is--you can't graft American institutions on an utterly alien tree and expect everything to work as it does here. It doesn't work all that well here. But I am not one of those who feel that that was a grievous error. Being perfectly candid, I do not agree with President Johnson that it was a mistake to get rid of Diem. I happen to feel very strongly that it was a mistake not to have gotten rid of him much earlier. I am one of those who basically feels that we should have pressed the Vietnamese a lot harder than we did.

M: Every step along the way.

K: Yes. And let me tell you, in pacification we did. There's a lot of talk about this term leverage. The only people who consistently applied leverage were the pacifiers, at least in my day.

M: And with good results, despite the horrible things that are always--

K: Precisely. You know, this is a very complicated political equation. It's much easier to get rid of a province chief than it is to get rid of a President, a dictator to boot. But essentially I think Diem was leading Viet Nam right down to defeat. The question was not whether he got booted by his military in November '63--that was certainly not the optimum time. It would have been much better by the end of 1960 when our ambassador there, Elbridge Durbrow, was saying to us that "this guy and his brother Nhu are just taking this country to the dogs." And they were. And we applied palliatives during the Kennedy years and they didn't work.

LBJ--and history, I'm sure, will render the same verdict--was left holding the bag.

M: Oh yes.

K: Those who say that his war was handed to him by his predecessors, in the largest sense that is true. He was confronted with a set of decisions that they had avoided. They were able to avoid. He wasn't. The alternative by '65 was very simple. Either we intervened with Americans in strength, or South Viet Nam was going to collapse. The other options had all since been played out. He could have let it collapse. It would have been a viable line of action, consistent with many of the things he had said in '64 but not others. But he made what, I am convinced to this day, was a patriotic big league decision. That it may have turned out in the light of hindsight to be wrong is another matter.

If he had done post-1965 a lot of the things that I am sure in hindsight appear to us all to have been more important than they were seen as being at the time, I am sure we would have done better. On the one hand, I'm very pleased that starting from pretty close to scratch I managed to get the Other War really revved up--and, as I say, with the Vietnamese too. It was a Vietnamized program from the outset.

But, on the other hand, I regret deeply that I didn't fight harder, push harder, elbow more, and really get out there to jack it up a lot more than I did. Others will have to judge whether I could have pushed to better effect than I did. Most people call me one of the greatest pushers of them all. So certainly in Viet Nam terms I pushed a lot harder than most, though, as I said earlier,

I came along pretty late in the day so I had the advantage of at least sensing how many mistakes we'd made previously.

M: How bad did Tet wipe you out?

K: Not seriously at all. Tet did not wipe us out. And the proof of that pudding is in the eating. Tet was a major setback in terms of control of people, but a major setback not because the enemy attacked us at Tet--he did the precise opposite. He ignored the countryside at Tet, radically changed his strategy, and used all of his rural assets that he could get his hands on to attack the cities.

M: So that forced your cover--

K: That partly forced and partly led--you know, they weren't all that forced. A lot of them, their families were in the cities, in the towns, and they all went back. So our people, our pacification shield--the RF/PF (Regional Forces/Popular Forces) battalions--very largely evacuated the countryside, sometimes brought back by their commanders, sometimes going back under their own steam--

M: Sometimes the commanders went back with them.

K: Yes, indeed. And we just sort of gave up a great deal of area that we were in the process of pacifying. This was our doing, not the enemy's. The proof of that is that a vacuum appeared in the countryside; the enemy did not consolidate those gains. His TET losses were so great, and he kept attacking the cities instead of consolidating his rural strength, so that when we finally got back out in the countryside over the course of the next six months, and then particularly in the First APC, we found that it was easy as pie to go back into the countryside. Really not much had changed since we'd left, whereas all the calamity howlers had been saying,

"Oh, Christ, they've consolidated, etc."

M: They never recovered.

K: They didn't.

M: Did you talk to the President directly during the period of Tet?

K: Not directly until I came back, as I recall, in early March. Early March of 1968, and I told him then. I might add that by that time I was being one hell of a lot more cautious, because by that time we were all under a cloud. Let's just face it, we were under a cloud with Lyndon Johnson. The people--Bunker, Westmoreland, and Komer--who had told him everything was going great just two months before, and then boom! And as LBJ admits in his book and in the TV interview, he was sort of swayed too by all these press accounts and everything else. It fascinates me the way Presidents believe what they hear on the boob tube, or read in the paper, much more than what their advisers tell them.

M: Particularly him--

K: Well, not just him. Let me tell you, I watched JFK. Presidents are very sensitive to the political dimensions. Presidents read papers before they read intelligence. I don't think LBJ was all that different. He was more open about it. But, boy, let me tell you, I wrote lots of memos to JFK, and I had a real rapport with him, as I did with LBJ, but I never kidded myself that I was competing with Joe Alsop. In fact, if Joe Alsop said something that was germane to a really important issue of mine, an account of mine, that I thought was wrong, or somebody else that I knew damned well the President was reading, I shot in a memo in a hurry.

M: Before it got said--

K: Yes. To say, "Max Frankel was wrong this morning." You know, sometimes you make it a whole memo, sometimes you make it a little paragraph because you don't want to make it a big thing. But I was damned sure to make sure my man knew that the advice he was getting through the press was wrong, if it was wrong. On the other hand, if it was right, if it supported me, it was great stuff!

M: So you weren't too optimistic in March '68?

K: No. Particularly, as I say, in the light of everybody saying, "Christ, those guys out there,"--and of course Westmoreland had been relieved by that time--it was announced, or shortly thereafter--I forget.

M: Did Mr. Johnson give any intimation that he was about to pull a major reverse as far as policy was concerned, not withdrawal, but so far as the bombing campaign was concerned?

K: Absolutely not. It is interesting. This time I was back on leave.

M: Strictly?

K: Strictly. The other time I had been dragged in. It was fascinating to me, and thinking back in hindsight, highly indicative that I was not really called on for anything in early-March '68. I saw the President once; I think I may have seen him twice. He was as friendly as he ever was. He asked me again, as he invariably did, "What do you need; what can I do for you?" He was great on that, which also suggests that I didn't ask him for too much.

But I could almost sense that he was not all that interested anymore in what I had to say about my business--nor was any one else in Washington. There was a change in command at the Pentagon, and Clifford didn't even know I was back, or if he did, wasn't interested;

nor was Warnke, nor was the State Department, etc. So it was the most quiet time I had ever come back to Washington. I was in the eye of the storm.

M: That would make you start thinking, wouldn't it?

K: I interpreted this at the time as being evidence that they were all quite disillusioned with us in Saigon, that we were no longer regarded as credible witnesses. I felt badly about this. It basically affected my view of Washington, which was later proved right when the big decisions came out.

But little did I realize, because of course I was not involved, that decisions were underway which sort of made it almost irrelevant in the view of Mr. Clifford, and of course the President, what was happening in pacification because as far as Clifford and DOD and ISA were concerned, this was no longer an important variable. As far as the President was concerned, he had far greater things on his plate. So it wasn't just that we had lost credibility--but we had.

I went back and reported to Westmoreland and Bunker that, "Boy, we have a long way to go before they listen to us the same way again." They were unhappy, as I was, because we thought we had really done very well at Tet. They thought they had done rather better than I thought we had done, because they didn't sense the American dimension quite to the extent I did because I had had the advantage of going back. Westy still thought he was almost in play with the prospect of more troops, although he had been turned off, as I recall--no, it was the 12th of March that he went up to--I was back already, I think--before he went up to Clark Field and got the word from Wheeler that he wasn't getting his troops, etc.

M: There's no doubt in your mind that he was sincerely asking for this troops at that time.

K: There's plenty of doubt in my mind. And I think to get the full picture, you've got to read John Henry's thesis. I think John Henry's thesis comes closest to the facts. If the President was going to do what Wheeler and the JCS wanted him to do, and call up the troops, call up the reserves, reconstitute the strategic reserve, put the nation on a war footing and go all out to make it a real war and win the war--which is what the JCS wanted--then Westy sure as hell wanted 206,000 more troops. But this was a contingency plan totally dependent on what those decisions were. And I am one of those who believe that Westmoreland was screwed, and that the President was screwed by the JCS. That's being a little more blunt than John Henry was, but not much more.

I will say this: Read John Henry's quotations direct from Buz Wheeler, of whom I'm a great admirer though sure as hell not on Viet Nam--I admire few people in Viet Nam. But from Buz Wheeler's own words it turns out that that was what was going on; that Wheeler used Westmoreland in this request as part of a much larger fight which had been going on really since '65 to get the President to regard this war as the number one priority and put all else aside, something the President was never prepared to do.

And this idea that Lyndon Johnson escalated, escalated, escalated is for the birds. Johnson and McNamara tried to really keep a damper on this war and prevent it from getting out of control. Unfortunately, that didn't work either, largely because of the issues we've been discussing today--that the policy was not adequately translated into

performance in the field, not by the Americans and not by the Vietnamese. So there you are.

I felt very deeply we had lost all credibility with Washington, and naturally I was very chastened myself--although predicting the Tet offensive was not my business. And my guys responded better to the Tet offensive than anybody else. We ran Project Recovery, which I was directly asked by Bunker to take care of all the people who had been affected by Tet, and then we went on--

[End of Tape 3 of 3, Side 1, Interview III]

INTERVIEW III continued

Tape 3 of 3, Side 2

M: Well, we got you there. We went through the Guam meeting before.

K: Yes. You had a question--well, we didn't really go through the Guam meeting.

M: That's right. We went through Manila and the change to military and CORDS, not to the Guam meeting.

K: Guam came before the change to military control and CORDS. It was the U.S. Vietnamese bilateral conference at which the decisions were made. . . .

(Interruption)

M: The Guam conference is important, yes.

K: The important thing about Guam is that this is the place that LBJ made the announcement--not to the Vietnamese yet--that I'd be going out; that Bunker would be taking over. The essential purpose of Guam, as he put it, was to meet the new team. He had Locke there, too.

I must say, the President sort of sneaked one over on me on the Locke appointment. He had told me that I was going to Viet Nam and I had been duly bouleverse, but like a good soldier I had said, "Yes, sir, if that's what you want done."

And then I had taken off to Guadaloupe for ten days. My first vacation in quite a while--a couple of years.

M: If you go to Viet Nam, you need a vacation.

K: Yes. And I was going to Viet Nam alone. My family was staying home, naturally. So that was okay. I was my own boss by then, because I

was the White House Special Assistant for you know what.

I was down there when I got this hurry-up call to come back; that the Guam conference had been laid on. Well, dammit, I tried to get out of it. I couldn't call up. In Guadaloupe you can't communicate. They at one point talked about sending an aircraft for me--and bull, I'd get back commercially.

I land in San Juan en route back to Washington and read in the paper big announcements. You know, Bunker is going. Well, I had been a strong advocate of Bunker. I had been strong for the replacement of Lodge who wanted to come home. And of all the candidates, I thought Ellsworth Bunker was the best if age did not get in the way.

But nobody had told me anything, least of all Lyndon Johnson. When he told me he was going to send me out, I sort of thought I would be number two. It turned out that I wasn't going to be number two, that a guy named Abrams was going out, and that somebody named Eugene Locke, who was our ambassador in Pakistan, was going out as the deputy ambassador--I was just another ambassador.

Well, Jesus, it seemed to me that this was hardly the way to run the show. What did we need all that brass out there for in the first place? And in the second place, if I hadn't won my spurs in the preceding year, the only guy who on Viet Nam seemed to be doing anything with his little piece of the action! The rest of it looked as though we were going in circles. So I was very unhappy about that. President Johnson never explained to me why he sent Gene Locke out. But I did ask Rostow. My best guess is he thought Ellsworth Bunker was what--at that time, seventy-two years old--

M: He was past seventy.

K: Yes, and that Ellsworth might have a heart attack someday, and if he did there'd better be somebody out there to mind the store. Well, I figured that I could mind the store better than Gene did because I had more experience than he did by a country mile. But then I was not in the same relationship to the President as I guess Gene was. I rather gathered that Gene was the insurance policy just in case Mr. Bunker had a serious medical problem.

M: He didn't stay long.

K: He didn't stay long. He arrived, and he found out what I would have told the President if he'd asked me--and what I did tell Rostow and some others--that he didn't have a job. Ellsworth Bunker turned out to be very, very much on his toes, very active. He knew more than the deputy ambassador. And now that I was running pacification and the embassy had been jacked up and expanded somewhat, Gene Locke found himself, after five or six months out there with his perfectly delightful wife Adele, sort of excess. He tried to get into pacification and I said, "No, that's what I'm sent out here to run." He tried to get into CIA; they didn't want him. So Gene got very frustrated.

M: So he came back and ran for governor of Texas.

K: So he came back and ran for governor of Texas. And I don't blame Gene. I have often wondered what the hell was behind that.

At any rate, I thought I was going to be deputy to Westmoreland, if not deputy to Bunker. Then I find out that Westmoreland is going to have two deputies, and that there's a General Abrams, vice chief of staff of the Army, coming out. Well, the word was that in case something happened to Westmoreland they had to have a military

man there to take over.

Then they brought out the big noise about how Westmoreland was going to put Abrams in charge of jacking up the ARVN, all the Vietnamese forces. That was for the birds. Abrams did very little about it until he took over from Westmoreland. It was not Abrams' fault, but Westy was one of these guys who didn't use a deputy. So Abrams sort of sat on the shelf until post-Tet when he took over, poor guy. It was not his fault, not Westy's fault either. It's just the way things run in the Army.

And it turned out that I, as the second deputy, was a real deputy because the minute Guam was over I went right down to Saigon--I think I went with Westy on his plane--and worked out with him precisely the terms of reference for the new Pacification Program. In fact, I had a memorandum which I made clear, had presidential approval, saying that I was not going to be a political adviser or anything like that. I was going to be the president of a subsidiary corporation called pacification, and was to be the operating head of that program reporting to Westmoreland and through him to Bunker, and that I was going to be a commander and a manager. Westy turned out to be just delighted. Westmoreland and I had no problem on that score from the day we left Guam until the day he went home in June 1968.

M: I got earlier from something that you said that you had in fact recommended that you move out there earlier.

K: Negative.

M: I drew a false inference then.

K: No. In fact, I said I had not. I built the better mousetrap, but

I never had--

M: You had suggested that you be the--

K: No.

M: Who dreamed that up?

K: I'd like to know. I'll give you one good guess. Robert McNamara.

M: Okay, I was going to guess Rostow first, and then--

K: I don't think Walt carries that kind of clout with the President on an issue like that. I suspect that Walt may also have been enthusiastic about it, partly--let's be kind and let's say primarily because he thought I could do something--and secondarily, because he didn't want two Vietnamese in the White House, although I was very careful not to get into Walt's handling of his problems as long as he backed me on mine, and he did.

M: Then you're in Puerto Rico going to the Guam conference.

K: I went to the Guam conference then. The die was cast and I was very unhappy, mainly because of the shock treatment they'd given me, and finding out that I wasn't number two--I was going to be number five. It wasn't so much the status of the thing. I never regarded going to Viet Nam as a promotion, nor did anybody else. But there was a war on, and we all have to serve. That didn't bother me. And even being number five or four--.

The operational thing did bother me. Were they layering me so damned far down that I wasn't going to be able to produce on the things I said needed to be done. I had very live in my mind Bill Porter's problems with MACV, with Cabot Lodge, with Washington, etc.. And if I was going to be the fall guy who was supposed to go out there and do what I said needed to be done, well, dammit, look what they

ended up including me in. They needn't have sent Abrams out for another year; they needn't have sent Locke out at all. As it turned out, I didn't have that many problems with the thing. So my fears turned out to be unfounded, but it was a prudent bureaucratic reaction on my part. I really thought--and I still think to a certain extent--that they hadn't really done as right by me in terms of my demonstrated ability to produce. Because if they'd put me higher up on the ladder, I would have had even more impact on the other parts of the war than I did.

M: Which you didn't--

K: That's right. Well, I was able to do plenty.

Now, the last little thing in this--because we've got to close this off--was that until the day I left President Johnson was not eager to have me go. He was very ambivalent. I kept sending in memos, saying, "Mr. President, I've got to leave for Viet Nam. Bunker is already there. I've got to close up shop." I wrote several versions of NSAMs. I wrote the final NSAM, which gave me my new charter. It also said, "Komer's going to have a rear echelon in the White House just like Porter did. Komer's job as Special Assistant will be taken over by his Deputy, Ambassador William Leonhart, who will function as special assistant to me for the Other War."

The President approved, signed the NSAM. It's right there in the official record. But once I left, my old office just went downhill because the President never really used Leonhart and the staff I left behind as a backup for me. Leonhart didn't have the advantage of a personal relationship; he never got the title, et cetera, and it

was a very messy thing.

But it turned out that it wasn't all that bad because the power that I had went with me to Saigon, as it turned out. Interesting. To show you how far the long arm of Lyndon Johnson reaches, whether he knows it or not, was that everybody thought that I was Lyndon Johnson's personal boy in Viet Nam, as well as in Washington. All the Vietnamese thought that I had a direct pipeline to LBJ, and many of the Americans did too.

As it happened, I was quite conscious of this problem as it might affect my working relationships with Bunker and Westy, whom by this time I knew quite well. I made it clear to Westmoreland and to Bunker long before I went out, and repeated it when I got there, that I was working for them, not for LBJ; that they were my bosses; that I was not maintaining separate channels, I was not going to go around end. I had ceased being a White House wheeler-dealer and was now an operator in the field working for them. Because if they had felt that--it would not have worked.

And here is the amusing part of the history, of which my part is not going to be out until LBJ goes to the next world. The President did not, once he had made all these decisions, etc., feel like giving up his boy. And about two weeks before I left, he gave me about the only clear indication that he had given me up till this point, of his view--most of the time he just sort of evaded--his view of what I should be doing. He said to me, "Bob, what I contemplate is that you'll keep your job right here with me; you'll be my Special Assistant for the Other War, and you'll wear another hat out there, working for Bunker and Westmoreland. I expect you'll be able to

handle this, sort of commuting back and forth."

I said, "Mr. President, that won't work! Let me explain to you the way it'll happen. First, I'll issue policy in my capacity as your executive agent, then I'll put on my other hat and get in an airplane and go out there and advise Westmoreland and Bunker how to reply to the word from the White House. Then once I've got them straightened out, I'll run back here and as your executive agent, I'll reply to that mail and sign you on."

M: You could stay here and write both halves of it here.

K: The general tenor of his reaction was, "And what's so wrong with that!" To him, that was great. So I switched to another argument which was, "Look, I cannot serve two masters. I can't be simultaneously your man on the Other War and Bunker and Westmoreland's man running the Other War out there. You can't divide me in two that way. That would just create nothing but trouble with everybody."

He didn't give me much satisfaction. So I repeated those points to him in a memo, which I wrote shortly thereafter. Christ, if I was going to Viet Nam, I didn't want to be bifurcated in a Solomon-like solution to boot.

Well, he never raised the thing again. And the NSAM that I sent in to him, the last version, wasn't changed very much. Finally I went out. This issue was never raised again. But in his final interview with me, he did make it clear to me that if at any time I wanted to get in touch with him I should do so directly, not telling anybody. He said,

"You don't even have to tell Rostow. You know there are ways of dealing directly with me. And I would be very interested in your keeping me informed."

Well, of course I said, "Yes, Mr. President. I will do the best I can, but bear in mind that I'm going out there working for two other guys, and that I can't violate the rules of the game." Well, he didn't think that was--you know, you can violate the rules of the game if the President damn well tells you to, and if he'd ordered me to I would have violated the rules of the game, quick, if it was an impossible situation. But that was the final thing.

The practice I pursued, however, was not to communicate independently with the President unless he asked me. While I was out there, there were a number of messages from Rostow asking for my views, and I gave my views when asked. I mean, "the President would like to know," etc.

Whenever I came back I answered any question that he had for me, and he had plenty, fully and fairly. If he asked me was General Ky incompetent, I gave him my answer, whether or not my view agreed with Bunker's, Westmoreland's, or anybody else's. I mean, a direct question, you give a direct answer. So I didn't indulge in any hanky-panky.

Now, that really takes the story up to the time when I went off to Turkey.

M: Just any detail there is on that, had you asked to come back?

K: What detail do you have in mind?

M: Did Mr. Johnson see this as a sort of last minute honor for inservice in the cause?

K: Yes, I think so.

M: You'd have previous experience, of course, in Turkey.

K: I was a Turcophile. The first time I ever got to know Lyndon Johnson was when I went on the Middle East trip, when Kennedy and Bundy sent me as one of his staff. He knew of my strong interest in Turkey, etc. As a matter of fact, one time later George Ball suggested that I might go out to Pakistan as ambassador. I told George and also Mac Bundy that about the only place in the world that interested me to be an ambassador--I wasn't that eager--was Turkey--but sure as hell not Pakistan!

So it was pure circumstance. Our assistant secretary, Near East, Luke Battle, had resigned to take this cushy job with COMSAT. It was the last days of the Johnson Administration, so obviously no political appointment could be made. So they brought back Pete Hart, Ambassador to Turkey, to replace Battle ad interim, and this left the thing open. People knew of my interest in the thing. And bam, out it came.

M: So it was just a short-term sort of thing--

K: A message to Bunker, saying, "I want to appoint Komer Ambassador to Turkey, etc." Bunker called me and I wasn't even there to get the message. He called me in and said, "Bob, here it is."

I said, "Well, I'm very ambivalent. I'd really love to go to Turkey, but we've got a war on here."

He said, "Bob, just don't look a gift horse in the mouth. This is your chance to be number one, and you ought to take it, instead of being number two or three around here. You've accomplished great things, etc."

And I said, "But look, it's the end of the administration."

He said, "Look, they'll put you in, and maybe they'll get it through before Congress closes for the election campaign." As it turned out, run of bum luck, the Fortas affair developed and they never even sent my nomination up. What was the use! Because the critics had said the Fortas appointment was a lameduck appointment, and even a piddling appointment like mine Fulbright could have used to start an argument. So I didn't get sent up.

So I then said to Bunker, "Well, look. Under the circumstances, shouldn't I forget about it?"

"No," he said, "Bob, Harry Truman appointed me a lameduck ambassador to India in 1952, and I stayed there for eighteen months. So take your chances."

And so I went. There were many other circumstances affecting my decision that had nothing to do with President Johnson. But that was it.

M: So that was the end of the presidential contact because you were there when the administration ended, and--

K: That's correct. I saw the President before I left. He couldn't have been nicer, but essentially my professional dealings with LBJ ended as of a few days before Thanksgiving '68 when I took off. The next time I saw him was down at the ranch after he had retired.

M: You're mighty kind to give us all this time. We appreciate it very much.

K: Not at all.

[End of Tape 3 of 3, Side 2, and Interview III]

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