INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWEE: EDWARD G. LANSDALE

INTERVIEWER: TED GITTINGER

PLACE: General Lansdale's home, McLean, Virginia

Tape 1 of 2

G: General Lansdale, we were discussing some of the reform programs in South Vietnam while you were there. Did you advise on the Highlands relocation program?

L: No, I really didn't. I was concerned about the mountain people up there, the Montagnards, and their attitudes towards the lowland Vietnamese, which was rather, not hostile, but suspicious of them. There wasn't a good relationship. I used to talk with Ngo Dinh Diem about it, and he was certain that the Vietnamese would get along very well, but it was the usual Vietnamese optimism and not entirely realistic.

On that very problem, Wolf Ladejinsky got up into the highlands, and there were some northerners coming down that Diem was putting in essentially as self-contained units of northerners into new villages that they would start. They were just dotted in with the mountain people, but they were permanent settlers where the mountain people were essentially roving tribesmen at the time, migratory types. Wolf Ladejinsky did work with Diem on getting Vietnamese

officials up with them who would be sympathetic towards the mountain people and could work with them. He had very mixed luck with that program, but he tried very earnestly to do it.

I would aid and abet as I could when I would see Diem and bring the subject up. I sent some of my people at the time up around the tribes to sort of ascertain what their feelings were and so on. I wasn't too happy at what they had to report, because they were still sort of antagonistic to these dirty Vietnamese who were coming up among them. They were very loyal to some of the French who were leaving, and some of the French themselves who were working with me in TRIM [Training Relations Instruction Mission] were paratrooper types, airborne types, sort of special forces types of people who were very self-reliant types and had a very deep affection amounting to a love, really, of tribal people. There hadn't been intermarriages, but there'd been the next thing to it. They had a lot of women up there that were accepted in the villages and by the mountain people, tribesmen, as brothers. And some of the Americans started taking their places; they were stationed up there for at least over a year. But they didn't have brothers among the Vietnamese, so they were always sort of a strange element there.

Diem thought of it, the highlands, mostly in economic terms, not in social terms. It's interesting to note that his plans led towards a cattle industry up there and a dairy production a la Switzerland. He was planning at one time, and I think he had some

Japanese help with the thing, on getting dairy herds started up there, moving central Vietnamese from the coastal areas up into the mountains to start large dairy herds up in there and start a dairy industry, an initial processing type of thing up to and including such things as canning milk and so on. But his plans never saw fruition at all, this was just something he was dreaming about for them.

G: I think Lyndon Johnson had some ideas along that line sometime later.

L: Yes, maybe so, maybe so. I don't recall on that. But it's a terrain that leads itself to such things very definitely.

G: The Michigan State University people had a number of programs under way in the middle and later fifties, didn't they?

L: Yes, yes.

G: Did you have any dealings with them?

L: I had a friendly working relationship with them. It wasn't anything formal, it wasn't a regular basis. [John Alfred] Hannah had come over originally and surveyed, and he was president of Michigan State at the time. [He] had come over and done an official survey, and he was talking to me about the plans of the team. So right then in its inception stages I was giving some advice and assistance as I could.

Wes Fishel, who was appointed the head of it, I had known before. I met him when he first came into Saigon. There was some resistance by some of the Americans in Saigon at the time to him, and

I think that stemmed down from relationships they'd had with him in Japan. Evidently he'd thrown some weight around or something in Japan, and it upset them a bit. There was a debate in the embassy when he was arriving about whether anybody should go down and meet him or not at the airport. And I said, "Hell, I'd like to go down and meet him, because I've heard a lot of him, and I want to get acquainted, so I'll go down and meet him." So I went down and met him and brought him on into town, and finally got to know him rather well. We became close friends.

During the early days as they were bringing a team together, they were working over with our economic mission and were going through a lot of planning sessions initially, and I was worrying about the timetable of the Geneva Accords and the agreements after the Geneva Accords, the votes and so forth, the plebiscites. I was very deeply concerned that South Vietnam had no governmental infrastructure to speak of. The Michigan State people were going to set up training a civil service, and I said, "Well, goddamn it, there isn't any civil service." Now, there's some civil servants down from the North among the refugees, there's some in the South who were under the French in Saigon, but not out in the countryside at all. And at the time of the accords and the ceasefire in South Vietnam, the French were still running the countryside and were province chiefs and district chiefs and so on.

I had brought them all together in the initial stages of our planning for what we called pacification at the time, but it was

really filling in the gap of what was missing in the South. We had a meeting of all the province and district chiefs and government officials concerned with them in Saigon and mostly they were French. So that in that meeting I was surprised nobody agreed with anybody else. It was typically French. A province chief would get up and say something and promptly his district chiefs would say, "It isn't so." The French Army people were there, and the intelligence people would say, "That isn't the situation at all." The Vietnamese government would get up and say they heard differently on it and so on. That went for province after province. It was sort of a mess that way, but it was a refreshingly candid meeting and we gradually managed to hammer out some facts about different provinces.

G: What kind of a picture emerged from this meeting?

L: Well, one thing was we saw immediately we had to get Vietnamese in to run Vietnamese affairs out there. So we had to get people somehow or other out into the countryside to become officials or acting officials or something. I went to the Michigan State team that was sitting and they were planning on a civil service, and I said, "We need it right now. You don't have time to wait. Can we take the officials there now and just take a chance on them and station some of them in the country and bring them in one at a time on something to do some training, maybe a six-months' course or a three-months' course or a one-week's course, something to get them back into the country again?"

Meantime, we had teams of young civil servants from North Vietnam who had been put together as working groups or teams to go out in the provinces and help villages and districts start governing themselves and fitting them with some of the needs of the central government in Saigon. I was hoping that some of them would get along well enough in their local areas to be accepted and become the establishment, so to speak, there. That didn't happen too well. They were northerners and were deeply resented in the South.

But even so, Michigan State wasn't going to be hurried at all, to fill the gap in a hurry. So they sat down and eventually came up with a very good administrative school. But they had no idea that the numbers of people in the civil service were not only city dwellers and not out in the countryside, but weren't too well-educated, nor were they experienced in administration. Most of them had been colonial servants to a big boss who would be about a GS-5 in our government. These people were the kind that the man running things would let them stamp the papers with a rubber stamp and affix stamps onto official [documents] and see that people came through the gateway in to the desk and very simple routine tasks. They were suddenly a province chief or a district chief with real problems to work on, and they were scared to move. They were afraid of making mistakes and then getting chewed on from headquarters and fired or something, so it was a real slowdown on things. And all the time I was worrying, "These are the areas that they're going to hold a

plebiscite in and our side has got to be better than the other side in order to get the vote. It's a real problem."

But I think eventually Michigan State did a very good job in their administrative school, but it took them years to start producing graduates who became very good assistant province chiefs, and so on. But I'm afraid [in] some of my early sessions with them I was fighting mad when I'd get in with academic types and also police types. At the time they were working with the police and I was worrying that they were sending out policemen, training them with the use of .38 revolvers when they were going out against ambushes of guerrillas who would use heavy weapons on them, and mortars and light artillery and unit tactics that a squad could take one policeman very easily. And they used to do it. And the very early, early guerrilla work on the thing went directly against the police in the original day, which the police advisers didn't understand because as they would send out a large enough force of policemen to scout an area and secure it, the guerrillas would go around and the families were stationed in a camp. And the guerrillas would raid the camp and kill the women and children with families and maybe ambush the men on the way back. But the men started refusing to leave home; they'd rather stay there to defend them.

So there were a lot of problems that way that were very strange to Americans who were advising there who came from metropolitan areas in the U.S. I remember one of the policemen was telling me

what it was like in Detroit, to police the city of Detroit. He said, "We have lots of troubles, including racial troubles, and we're used to strife like this." But they weren't used to strife in Vietnam. It was an entirely different type. And I said, "In Detroit how are your men with .38s against machine guns? And how about .50 caliber machine guns where they shoot from a distance, not in close with you?" "Oh, we don't have that in Detroit." Well, it's that type of thing.

G: It seems to me that there was some conflict about the civil guard about this time, or maybe it was a little later.

L: Right after that.

G: Some of the officers in the army, I've heard, were suspicious of Diem's motives in setting up the civil guard. They suspected he was going to use it as a counterweight to the army in case of a coup or any disloyal move. Is there anything to it?

L: There were some feelings on that and also there was the feeling among some of the American economists that that was what he was going to do. I don't think the military ever bothered that much. We ran an operation up in one of the dissident areas at one time just north of Saigon in which we used some army officers with some police-type units, plus the civil guard, in the jungle up there. I remember they came back and reported they saw a rhinoceros up there. I've never heard of rhinoceros, but I've since found out there's an Asian rhinoceros that they apparently saw.

G: They're very rare, I think.

L: They're very rare, very rare. That excited them more than seeing an enemy or something. But the operation wasn't that successful. These city troops weren't used to going out in the jungle and so on, so there were a lot of mistakes made, and the results were too poor for the effort that we put into them. We scrapped that idea. But the civil guard thing kept going on and on and the U.S. economic mission, who had charge of arming them and so on, were very reluctant to do so. Finally General [Samuel] Williams, [who] was in MAAG later--this was about 1957-58, around in that period; I remember I was in Washington at the time--he went ahead and distributed arms from MAAG and so forth to the civil guard so that they could get out in the provinces and protect themselves.

G: Well, did this get him into trouble with anybody?

L: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There was a very emotional fight over the thing. It was finally settled in Washington. I went to the meeting when it was finally settled and Leland Barrows was the head of the economic mission--

G: Could you give me that name again, sir?

L: Leland Barrows. B-A-R-R-O-W-S. Leland was very emotional about it and very upset. He finally just said, "All right, then. You go ahead. You've done it anyhow."

G: What lay behind his objection, do you think?

L: He didn't want police as military, and fighting guerrillas as military, because that's all they were fighting at the time, the

army and so on. But the security, if they'd approached the problem of security in a province or a district, it would have been a different thing, you know. You use whatever you can get, villagers and so on, which is the way we were trying to look at it. We were trying to get armed manpower in there under some discipline or control so that they just wouldn't run berserk in a place. They would be responsible for what they did. It just became an argument over missions and roles and so on.

G: I see. Sort of a doctrinal dispute.

L: More than anything else it was. I think that lay at the [heart of it]. There were personalities and emotions in it up their kazoo[?].

G: Who were some of the personalities that stand out in your memory?

L: I just remember Leland Barrows was one and General Sam Williams was another one who just said, "Goddamn it, I don't like to see men out having people shoot at them and not being able to shoot back. When you send them out to do a job, they ought to be able to defend themselves at least." So he had some arms stashed away and he just said, "Let's give them to them" and he did it.

(Interruption)

G: What was the security situation in the countryside like before 1957? Is is possible to generalize about it?

L: Yes. I left there at the end of 1956, so I don't know--January of 1957--but it must have been about the same. You'd travel anyplace. You'd take a few precautions. There were some ambushes along roads, but very few of them. I know that there were people in Saigon

around headquarters and in missions and everything who were sure that there were communists behind every bush out in the country, but that wasn't so. I remember taking Joe Alsop down to the beaches up into an area that allegedly was full of communist troops. And Pinewoods[?] came down from China. See, there was a delightful place to go swimming. We went down and had a picnic there and he was amazed. He said, "You're very courageous." I said, "No, there isn't any enemy here. I know it's safe." There were some close by, but they weren't too well-organized and they weren't big groups. And I had to do an awful lot of organizing and so on to get armed troops up where we were along the beaches there.

But that was true all throughout the South. I used to travel with my folks, my teams and so forth, all up the central coast and up in the highlands and so on. By and large, it was as peaceful as they later said it was after their big programs out there in the seventies, 1974-75. It was relatively peaceful, and it gave us a chance to really start putting in some things, administration and so forth, that were starting to work. By that token, somebody has since criticized, and they still do--I don't know whether you've got a question later on on this question--but one of the criticisms of Diem was that he took away the vote from villages and appointed officials for each village. We were striving in those days to make villages independent, to elect their own officials, and Diem was backing the programs. So I never did know the act. This was

supposed to be an act in 1955-56, early. It sure went by me without my ever catching on to it. I was seeing Diem almost every day. In working on this, we were teaching villagers to be self-reliant, to govern themselves, to tie in with governmental programs and so on, and he was very enthusiastic. Diem used to lecture me, "Can't we get arms out and arm the villagers so that they can defend themselves?" He said, "You know, if we can get the villagers armed, no dictators--whether me or communists--are ever going to run this country. The villagers won't let them. I'd like that very much." A very different thing in character from what the criticism of him was later.

G: How do you account for that law that made village chiefs an appointive position?

L: I don't know. They said it was his brother [Ngo Diem] Nhu's law, but since he wasn't writing laws then I really don't know. To me, it's [a puzzle]. The head of the Michigan State team told me later that that went in. I said, "Did you guys put it in or something?" And he said, "Oh, no, no, we wanted democracy out in the villages." And I said, "Well, that's what we were working for." So I don't know. To me that's a big, big puzzle.

G: Well, you say in your book that you were shocked when you found out later, I guess, when you returned to the States.

L: Yes.

G: How would you compare the problems and the performance of the whole U.S. mission under the various ambassadors and chiefs of mission who

were in office while you were there, between let's say, [Donald] Heath and [J. Lawton] Collins and [G. Frederick] Reinhardt?

L: Yes, I see that question there. That's interesting. Under Heath, we had a very professional team as people adjunct to a French colonial administration. They were by and large sympathetic to the French and to the French aims. Heath always got along very well with the French and he was emotionally a francophile. Dien Bien Phu I think hurt him emotionally, and far more than almost any other event out there. His heart was with the defenders up there. When he left, they had a presidential appointee in and Collins as ambassador pro tem. He had never said that he was going to stay for too long, but we knew that it was a temporary arrangement of some sort. He brought in his own team to work with him, to work with the ambassador, including intelligence and staffing and so on, his executive officer and what have you. Saved a few of the foreign service types who were there to act as staff for him, but his real thinking and so forth was done as a separate team that had come into the country with him.

At his first meeting, I got in trouble with him definitely. I got along very well with Heath, and later I got along well with Collins. But he started laying down the rules of how we were to behave towards the Vietnamese, and what we were to do for Vietnam without ever having a discussion first. I started to interrupt him, and he said, "Sit down, you're out of order," and so he just shut

me up fast. And he reminded me that he was also a general officer and I was in the military, you see. I was a colonel at the time. So I got up very dramatically and said, "As far as I'm concerned, I'm representing the American people, so since nobody else seems to around here, you're representing the President, so I ought to represent the people and we're walking out on you." And I turned around and walked out. I thought, "Well, there goes Vietnam. I'm fired."

But he asked me to please wait. So afterwards he said, "Gee, you're sure a hothead, aren't you?" and we talked and made up. I asked him when he did his thinking, because I said, "Maybe I can help you with that. I happen to know a lot of the people around here and a lot of their problems and I'd be very happy to explain and share it with you as much as I could." He told me he did his main thinking in a nap after lunch, so I said, "You mean you stay awake, just lie down on the bed and think?" And he said, "Yes." So I said, "Do you mind if I come up after lunch and sit down next to your bed and if you've got something, you can think out loud." So he said, "Yes, I guess I could." So we went through some sessions like that, and finally he told me it was a lousy idea. I guess he was missing his sleep or something.

But we were sort of that way all the time. And I think he saw the Vietnam scene from Washington almost all the time, because he was apparently corresponding back and forth quite a bit and was trying to do things very sincerely and honestly from the Washington

view. I was trying to work out the problems on the ground as amicably as I could to the benefit of the Vietnamese as well as to the benefit of the Americans, and the two views didn't always coincide. We got along and I could always go in and talk to him and he would respond and so forth, and never got a real frosted relationship, but it was a very easy relationship between us. But he often wound up giving me orders directly opposite to what I'd hoped he would.

G: Can you give me an example?

L: Well, one of the things was in the fighting of the whole damn thing with the sects. I had terrible problems trying to teach him about the sects and the sect leadership. I was working with him and so on and he would encourage me to go on and work with them. One of them, I had Trinh Minh The and, oh, I forget the Cao Dai [inaudible]. But they were in town, and I was trying to tell them to break up a liaison with the other sects on the thing, which they finally agreed to. I called Collins and told him that, and he said he was at the embassy, I said, "I've been up all night with these guys and I've finally worked out something. They're going to go with the government, go with Diem, so I think we've got this thing licked. When I come in, will you just congratulate them and say, 'That was a very patriotic thing for Vietnam that you did.'"

So I brought them in and he had his staff there, sitting with notepads of paper and pencils. As these two came in, he started

bawling them out for being anti-patriotic and so on. The man with me, my assistant, was doing the interpreting, and I finally just said, "Don't interpret that." I turned around to these two Vietnamese generals and said, "You're patriots, and we're very thankful to you." And he said, "No, they're traitors to the cause." And I said, "No, they aren't. They're very good. We've worked this whole thing out."

G: What was behind his--?

L: I think it was a misunderstanding or something. I think he didn't listen or something. I think he had a speech in his mind and made it regardless of what he heard is all I can figure on the thing. Meanwhile, his people were all busy taking notes, and I said, "Please explain who all these people are taking notes. They think they're news reporters or something here, journalists. Tell them that they're your staff and they just want to record every breath taken here." Which he didn't do. So I told them who they all were. But I finally just grabbed these two generals and said, "We're going to go out and get something to eat." I'd lost sleep and everything, and I was going to take them to breakfast someplace, which I did. I just left. It was that type of a thing once in a while. Yet he turned around with the French general who was named--oh, my memory is bad. It wasn't [Rene] Cogny. Was it Cogny?

G: Was it [Paul] Ely maybe?

L: Ely. Ely appointed me to head a commission, French and American, to work out the sect problems with the sects and the Vietnamese

government. He gave us something like a week or something to do it. Collins seconded that and went along with it, and then when I came up with recommendations at the end, it was zilch. They said, "Those aren't good recommendations." They were looking for something that I didn't produce, see? I gave them something that would solve the problems and they didn't like it.

G: What didn't they like? Can you recall the [details]?

L: I don't remember exactly. They said, "That isn't a workable solution." I said, "It's workable. One thing is to get all these armed men to disarm. That's one of the problems there. That's a central sticking point." So I had ways of disarming them all, including some payoffs and some going into the army, including taking the Binh Xuyen. I had the idea of getting all the Binh Xuyen troops to build a highway down to Cap St. Jacques, knowing that their Bay Vien, their leader, had real estate in Cap St. Jacques and he was all enthused about it. I told him, "We could name it after you." How else do you get a guy to give up ten thousand arms or something and do something like that? So they wound up, instead of that, meeting themselves with the sects. They let me be present, but with a big mob of French and American observers, at which point I was very busy working on some of the combat leaders among the sects to defect. The French were watching me as closely as they could; they knew what I was up to.

G: Were the French backing the sects to remain separate?

L: Oh, yes. They had liaison officers with them and were very close to them and actually gave them orders and so on. I talked to the main battalion, the combat battalion of the Binh Xuyen. I talked to their leader, who was the best combat commander there, and I told him I'd never had a chance to see him before. I said, "But I hear you were wounded in the leg, is it healed up?" I got him to pull up his leg and show me his wound, at which point the French who were close to me figured I was queer or something, you know, wanted to look at men's legs or something. They turned away from us in disgust and I started whispering to him fast, I said, "You're on the wrong side and you know it. I can just tell it in your face as I look at you," and he admitted it to me. I said, "Don't you want to be with the government and help Vietnam for the long pull?" and he said, "Yes, I'd like to." I said, "Well, I'll make arrangements so that you and your men can come over and cross sides. Just don't fight at all on either side if you want for a time." He said, "That'd be fine." But I could tell he was a good combat type and apolitical as could be. And he was in with a bunch of crooked people, gangster types, and he was a fighting type.

G: Do you remember his name?

L: No, I don't.

G: It wasn't Bay Vien, though?

L: No, because he was the big boss. He was a general, Bay Vien was. Bay Vien was standing there watching, but he and the French were

all laughing at me looking at this guy's legs. But they captured this guy and his wife, or came by and kidnaped them just after the attack started. I heard that people saw them being flogged with chains at their house, headquarters, and the troops were being disarmed, broken up by Vien's men. He was killed by his own people before he could desert and come over. But I'd arranged some meetings with Vietnamese officials with him, so I guess someplace security just got loose.

G: His cover was blown somewhere.

L: Yes. Yes. But those were emotional days, I'm telling you, because, deuce, you would make the least mistake and you'd lose people, and some people you'd like very much. In fact, just one look at him, and he was the sort of a guy I'd like to have as a friend right away. He looked at me, and apparently something clicked the same way with him, and it just didn't work out. And Trinh Minh Thi was killed in the same fighting there. Of course, he was much closer.

G: How about Ambassador Reinhardt, can you remember--?

L: Oh, Reinhardt. Now, Reinhardt came in as a real professional. He was very high in the foreign service at the time as far as people's appreciation of him. He was marked for very top jobs in the foreign service from then on. He came from a good family of academics in California and tried to run his embassy and so forth that way, so very much so that the foreign service could give him gold stars after his name every day. We were very close in discussing things

and talking about things originally. He asked me to continue the work I'd been doing, including seeing Diem all the time because I'd go in and keep him informed to what was happening. It gave him another approach to Diem. I said, "You can hit him high, and I'll hit him low." That type of a thing. It just made a good working team. Then later on I discovered that he'd gotten into some political things on the political party foundation, which I didn't agree with at all.

G: What was that about?

L: That was a party that Nhu started; it's actually the labor party. The Vietnamese name--it was a personalism thing. I forget its name now [Can Lao Party]. I'll think of it after a time. But they started forming a party about 1956, I think it was. I said I was shocked. I told him that. I said, "You know I'm seeing him all the time. We discuss politics a great deal, and he told me about this and told me that you approved." And he said, "Oh, yes. We've had meetings in the embassy on that." I said, "Geez, you should have told me," you know, and he didn't agree at all. And I said, "What I am worried about is it's a small government now. There are divisions of all sorts in their religion, locations, northerners and southerners and centralists here, and we're trying to get some harmony in relationships, and this thing is essentially starting a political party inside the government. They're going to immediately foster jealousies and partialities and so forth, and if you want to get ahead, you

belong to the party and work against other people and so forth." I said, "It's going to be very disruptive. They have political parties in the government now. I'd just as soon go ahead and act to let them grow naturally in real democratic fashion. So I'm opposed to this kind of thing." It got so I finally requested a chance to go to Washington, and I went in and saw John Foster Dulles on it and some of the others there in Washington at the time--the Can Lao Party. And I said, "The U.S. should work against such a thing, because that's going to weaken things rather than strengthen them," which essentially it did eventually. But I didn't win that one at all.

G: What were the arguments that they gave in favor of this party?

L: Oh, "It's a democracy now." I had them working on a constitution, and I'd suggested that Diem run for president with the idea that he start a constitutional government, and the whole framework would just be introduced by the election. So they said in a democracy you need strong political parties, and what better than to let the president have his own. I said, "Well, the President's a Catholic in a country that is largely Buddhist, and he's from the center, which is good, but there's a lot of southerners in there who've been fighting him with arms. He just conquered an armed rebellion on this thing, so you don't throw kerosene or gasoline on a fire, you know, which is what you guys are doing." So they said, "No, he needs his own party to back him on a thing. The President needs

that." I said, "You're thinking of the U.S. president, and this isn't the United States at all. We've got a long way to go here for these people to start learning to do things their own way and in ways that will feel right to them." But I lost that argument.

G: You came back to the United States, I believe, about the end of 1956, isn't that right?

L: Yes, the end of it, December. I'd hang around the first of January of 1957--

G: Was that an ordinary rotation for you?

L: No. No. I had been a child of the powers that be, so to speak, in Washington. I think at times they thought I was a bastard child; they wanted to get rid of me. But I was very, very tired physically. So much so that I was concerned that I couldn't do some of the things that I knew needed doing. So in December sometime, as it was getting close to Christmas, I sent a message to Washington pleading to pull me out, and [said] let me do something else for a time because I was going stale on the thing, and I didn't feel that it was good for the U.S. to have that happen out there. So they pulled me out and I went on the air staff in the Pentagon. I stayed in the Pentagon from then on until I was retired in 1963, did a long, long, stint in the Pentagon.

G: That's seven years, I guess, that's--

L: Yes, I was on the air staff for about five months or something in international affairs, and I hate to admit this. They all told me

how hard the work was and so on, and I took on the problems in three or four countries and I discovered an hour a day will about do it for you. I was hoping to get out of there and get into something a little more productive than that. But the Chief of Staff of the air force called me in and said, "The Secretary of the Defense is going to talk to you about a position in here and we in the air force would be very happy if you'd say yes." So I went in, and he wanted me to be a deputy assistant to him for special operations. They were moving out somebody and wanted me to replace him. So I said yes and went in and I became first a deputy for several years and then finally they changed the job a little bit, and I became assistant for special operations and stayed on till they wiped out the office when I left. But it kept changing, and it was very interesting, absorbing work.

G: Can you give me an idea of what sorts of things you would do in a position[?] like that?

L: Well, the first job I got into was a policy-level of intelligence, all Defense Intelligence. We ran policy for the army-navy-air force for almost what later became DIA; ran NSA, I had some of the NSA staff working for me there, but we ran policy for them. We were in on all of the early developmental stuff for intelligence and hardware and so on of space entry and orbiting devices and listening devices and whatnot. There was a period of great inventiveness by the Americans, and Eisenhower was encouraging that a great deal. Over on as part of the job was counterinsurgency, which I was

insisting on all the time, because that to me was the most fascinating place. And I got some of the special forces people up on my staff and started arranging for them to get into counterinsurgency. I couldn't get the army to write the policy for it; they were going to write a policy up in Leavenworth, but were taking forever and a day in coming up with something like that. So I was urging the special forces guys to do it at Fort Bragg and do it as a fait accompli and then feed it to the army from there, rather than their normal place at Leavenworth. Because it was a subject which they apparently didn't cope too well with at Leavenworth at that time.

So I had that plus a whole grab bag of things that didn't fit in elsewhere very much. We used to sit in on the U.S. Intelligence Board meeting. My boss, the assistant to the secretary, was General [Graves B.] Erskine, a marine corps general, who had commanded at Iwo Jima, and he had come down with a heart attack and was in the hospital and I'd asked President Eisenhower to--

(Interruption)

--he'd done it, so the Defense people were afraid to fire him. But meanwhile I had to run the whole shop and go over to the USAF[?] meetings and so on. And most of the heads of the service intelligence outfits outranked me. I was a colonel, and I was working mostly with two and three-star people, admirals and generals, above them in policy levels only. We had a very amicable working relationship, we got along fine, and I made some close friends among them. They

asked me why I never wore a uniform. I said, "You guys would see who it is talking to you, so I've got to wear civilian clothes all the time." But it worked out very well.

G: Did you continue to follow events in South Vietnam?

L: I did. I got over there several times. One time I went with the presidential commission on military aid to the various countries in the world, and I went on the one for Southeast Asia.

G: When was that, can you recall? I would guess it was before your trip in 1961.

L: Yes, it was before then. It'd be around 1959, maybe.

G: Were you able to--

L: Williams was still out there in Vietnam. We went to Burma and Indonesia, Thailand, on to Laos.

G: Well, General Williams stayed, I think, until September of 1960, so it would have had to have been before that.

L: Yes, because I saw him again later. I made another trip later. Then I made a trip in 1960, late, in December. I was fighting in Washington at the time over what became the Bay of Pigs and begged the Deputy Secretary of Defense, James Douglas, to please let me come out someplace overseas so I wouldn't be around when it happened, because they were asking me, "Please don't sound off in meetings in Washington on it," because I felt very strongly about not doing it.

G: Let me ask you a loaded question.

L: Yes.

G: What was Operation Mongoose?

L: Oh, that came later.

G: Oh, okay.

L: Yes. That was a product after the Bay of Pigs, and I haven't even known that they had anything named Mongoose or anything. President Kennedy asked me to do something about Cuba, that was later on, which I tried to do, but never got on top of it.

G: Now, you say Mongoose came later but that the Bay of Pigs thing was gathering momentum or whatever long before.

L: Oh, yes, in 1960, yes, the planning for it.

G: What didn't you like about it? Obviously you didn't like it much.

L: Well, it wasn't to be a guerrilla movement. It wasn't to be a revolutionary movement. It was to be an outside invasion by a small group of people who allegedly could get people to join their ranks, but without any internal organization inside the country and no way of getting volunteers out to join them and no way of staying alive against the armed forces that were going to meet them. So to me it looked suicidal. Initially, when the very initial concept was maybe going up in the Sierra Madre again and serving a small guerrilla force there to counter the Castro government and gradually build up its bona fides and be on its own, which made more sense to me, I was for it[?]. But when they started getting over into invasion force and everything, I just felt that it was too small and too many things left up in the air on it.

So anyhow, I'd asked Douglas if I could please go on out to Vietnam to take a look at it. And he checked with his friends over in State and they told him yes, and he came back and he said, "They're very suspicious of you there." I never knew that, and he said, "Are you going to start something while you're out there?" I said, "I'm not going to start anything. I'm going to take a good, hard look, though." Which I did.

I got in and I saw Diem--this is 1960, in December--and I asked him if he had his helicopters in good working order, and he said yes. I said, "Can I take a member of your staff, somebody that you trust, and borrow one of the helicopters, and I'll tell the pilot where I'm going. I'm going to go around there and take a look here at your security problems. Your man can report to you when he comes back." So he said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'll tell your pilot that; I don't want to tell you." So I went ahead and took his secretary of defense and secretary of the presidency, I think it was called, something like [that]. He was sort of the executive officer.

G: Why wouldn't you tell Diem? You didn't want the word to go out ahead of you, is that it?

L: Oh, yes, I didn't want anybody getting any alert, and I knew it would. And the Americans were asking me, "Where are you going?" and so on. And mind you, I still had a job. I had to give all clearances for any personnel to travel anywhere near an enemy who

were briefed in special intelligence and all sorts of things like that. So I had to write excuses for myself, you know, and give myself permission to go, which I did. Anyhow, we got down--I met Father Hoa; I'd heard what was happening at Ca Mau. I wanted to get down and see that. I wanted to get along the roads and see what the conditions had changed down in the South and the Delta and the Mekong regions and the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai areas and so on. Also I wanted to get in and see some of the people that had become unfriendly to Diem and see what the hell was eating them and what might have to be changed to satisfy them and so on.

G: Did you have impressions that things had gone downhill since you'd left?

L: Yes. One of the things I saw was Vietnamese artillery firing on villages down in the Delta. That shocked me more than almost anything else. That's something you don't do in a guerrilla war, you know. In a people's war, you never make war against your own people. I got up and stopped a battery firing and the commander was so ready to shoot me, you know. Fortunately, the defense secretary was along and talked him out of it. Also I was checking some of the Vietnamese navy operations down on the Mekong and Bassac [Rivers]. I'd gotten a lot of special vessels out to the Bassac patrol from the Pentagon, and the officer was telling me, "Some damn fool in Washington had sent these out here and they make too much noise." I said, "You go fast and it doesn't matter how much

noise you make, see?" I was arguing that way with them. Some American adviser there had told them they were too noisy for this job. Maybe so, but they were well-armed and better than what the French had left, by far. I was trying to show them how to do convoys of grain ships and so on along the rivers and keeping the enemy from getting a grain supply. Anyhow, that was a very educational trip for me, and I talked to our ambassador at the time and gave him some things.

G: Was that Ambassador [Elbridge] Durbrow at that time?

L: Durbrow, yes. Durbrow was very ill. He since has sworn up and down I sold him down the river because I said he was so ill he ought to pull out. And I felt that, because he had me at lunch and he laid down and ate lunch lying down. He was a good man, I thought very highly of him, but I didn't want to see a good diplomat go down like that.

G: What was wrong with him? What was the health problem?

L: He said it was something--I forget what it was. It was something connected with the stomach or intestines or something like that. He said he'd had trouble with it before and this was particularly bad, and he said, "I'll be all right. Just let me rest for a time." And he'd gasp for breath and so on and would wince with pain once in a while.

G: How was he getting along with the MAAG commander at that time?

L: I don't think too well. I don't--

G: Was that General [Lionel] McGarr by then?

L: I think McGarr was there then, yes.

G: Were you able to find out what was at the bottom of that?

L: Not really. Jealousies out there went on all the time, and all the time I was out there, you'd go to a party somewhere and you'd discover so-and-so wasn't speaking to the guy next door or something over some slight that you'd have an awful time finding out what it was.

G: I've heard stories that Diem was very good at playing off the MAAG commanders against the ambassadors.

L: I'm sure he was. Not only that but it was a natural thing anyhow. It went on forever. I came back and it was still going on at different things. I used to attend the country team meetings and so on, and I'd make the mistake once in a while of opening my big mouth to say something was wrong and everything, and half of the people there would get up and then in indignation want to walk out. "We can't take criticism like that," you know, thin skin stuff. Once I got mad at them. When we had troops there I said, "Geez, we've got young Americans getting killed out there, and you guys are playing games here and shafting each other and working behind each other's back and I think it's lousy. So I hope the Ambassador just catches one of you at it and makes you go out and put some of our casualties in body sacks for shipment home and teach you, goddamn it, what this is all about, see." Two of the guys got mad

at me and started walking out of the meeting, but [Henry] Cabot Lodge was ambassador and he said, "Geez, you sure get emotional." I said, "This is an emotional goddamn business, fighting a war. It's not all cold like that; you aren't just going through the motions and so forth the way everybody wants to here."

I got away. I know I was talking about something. I've forgotten what it was.

G: You're doing fine. This is exactly the sort of thing we like.

Right about this time, I think it was 1959, there was a National Intelligence Estimate drawn up--I think Chester Cooper may have been the chief writer of that--which predicted that there was going to be a lot of trouble ahead for Diem. That the countryside was gradually erupting and that he was going to have to use the army to secure it, and that his policies were alienating one group after another. Were you aware of that estimate at the time?

L: I probably was. I don't remember it that well.

G: Does that jibe with what your observations were when you visited?

L: When I visited in 1960, yes, yes. I was amazed at some of the predictions I made in that. I was coming back from that 1960 trip and CINCPAC wouldn't let me through Hawaii by air unless I stopped and wrote my report before I went to Washington and gave them a copy.

G: Was that Admiral [Harry D.] Felt then?

L: Felt, yes. So I said, "Okay, give me a place to write and I'll write it out right here," which I did. And I said, "I'll need

some mimeographed copies of it when we get out." He gave me the facilities to do it in Camp Smith[?]. But in that, I told what troubles Diem was running into, and opposition, and how he'd have to change some things or he was going to be in trouble, great trouble.

G: I think that was the year the National Liberation Front went public, so to speak.

L: I think about then, yes. It hadn't yet but--

G: Did you think that was a significant thing or just a political move?

L: I thought it was a political move, because there was a lot of opposition going on already. They were building it up.

But he had enemies that he shouldn't have had. While I was there, Diem would--I'd have dinner with him or something and he'd say, "Where'd you go this afternoon?" and I'd say, "Oh, around. I was around seeing people." And he said, "Yes, I mean between--" two hours. He apparently had police checking up on me or intelligence or something. I used to sneak out and see some of the opposition.

G: Had his attitude towards you changed?

L: No. I'd tell him, I'd say--no, I think it was his brother Nhu who was doing this, I'm pretty sure of that. I said, "I was out talking to some of your opposition, people who are opposed to you. Geez, you're doing something really wrong," and I'd tell him. He'd explain himself and so on and I'd say, "No, they don't see it that

way." But we were talking very, very freely back and forth. No, I used to disappear when I was close to him before and the police were checking on me. A lot of people were checking on me all the time so I had to learn to really disappear. And he used to comment on it from time to time.

G: Who was checking on you besides Diem?

L: Oh, in the early days the Binh Xuyen were and some of the sects and I'm sure the enemy was, too. They used to note anybody I'd see at the airport and everything. It'd be on Radio Hanoi the next day. They used to make them all generals. There'd be some poor guy, one Filipino architect came in. They said I saw a General so-and-so from the Philippines. I said, "Geez, you better shape up, you know, you're putting on too much fat here. You aren't exercising enough. If you're going to be a general for the Vietnamese communists, you'd better be a little trimmer than that."

G: This was a time when some of the more controversial programs began to come into play, the agrovilles and the strategic hamlets, and so forth. What was your assessment of those things?

L: Well, the idea was good, but the essential trouble with every last one of them was that they were made in Saigon or made abroad, outside of the area and dictated from above. I learned very early on, you do things locally and have it go from bottom to the top and accepted at the top to have them work. A lot of them were American ideas. Of course, some of them were British ideas there from

Malaya, and some of them I'm sure were Nhu's, just came in. I think he used to dream about these things or something. One of my team members was out running a lot of that stuff at the time. Rufe Phillips with AID did a splendid job for them of getting the American economic team out among the people and trying to work elbow to elbow with them and was quite successful in doing that.

G: I saw an article the other day by a newsman who claimed that Diem's deputy for strategic hamlets was a double, and one of the reasons the strategic hamlet failed was that he made darn sure that it alienated everybody it possibly could.

L: That could have happened anyhow, you know. I don't know. I'm sure there was some of that. They had some very skilled people working for them.

G: You're speaking of the opposition?

L: Opposition, yes. The singleton agents, particularly the political agents that they sent down in 1955-56 from the North to the South and reinfiltrated a lot of southerners, had taken training up in the North and much of it was individual training. But the guy that went in and gave them their final exam was Ho Chi Minh himself. I thought at the time, "Do you see any American president trying to give a final exam to a political agent to go in covertly and work with an enemy?" Not only a U.S. president but a British prime minister or anybody in the West from a democracy. It's just a strange notion, but apparently Ho Chi Minh was very good at it. He picked some

really terrific people to go down there. So he'd tell stories like that. I'm inclined to give some credit to the story. Whether it's true or not, it should be.

G: It should be true. Were we ever able to blow any of these people?

L: I'm sure some of them. Sure, yes. Yes.

G: Now, you went to Vietnam again in 1961, I think at President Kennedy's behest--

L: Yes, right.

G: --and issued what I've heard was a rather pessimistic report about the trends that were going on there. Did you find evidence that Diem was having problems with the embassy on that trip?

L: Somewhat. He had had problems with American officials in not only the embassy--and not the military who were pretty forward with him and blunt--but with diplomatic and economic people for some time. They felt that he talked too much for one thing, and they'd become bored, you know. "God, I've got to go over and talk to that guy again? I hope after two hours he'll let me go home again," that type of an attitude. For a guy going over to explain something from the President of the United States, trying to get him to do it, it was a negative attitude that they lived on.

I asked Diem about that several times, different times, and his answer usually was, "They know so little about my country, I've got to have them understand something. First of all, I take time off to explain things to them. I wish they would do the same for

me." He did that twice on economic means, I know. He was telling me about a German team of bankers who were in and he asked me what foreign loans were, and I said, "Well, ask somebody from our economic mission. I'll tell you what I think they mean, but get real good [advice] on [it]. You ought to do that, make use of some of these people. We've got some brilliant people out here who can really explain things to you." He said, "I did and I didn't understand their explanation." And I'd go over and talk to the economists and say, "Can't you get somebody over that can explain things in plain French or English, you know, so that this guy can understand it?" Because there were a lot of problems they were trying to solve that they couldn't.

But even the military, originally, they were talking about chain of command, and he asked me, "What the hell is a chain of command?" I said, "You just went through a long session on it, you know." He said, "I kept thinking it was some sort of a chain hanging down and I don't know what it is, and they kept telling me about chain of command." So I explained it to him, and then went over and talked to a MAAG chief and said, "Go over and spend some more time with him and tell him what a chain of command is. And make it very simple so that he'll understand. I think he does now, but I want to be doubly sure on that."

So there were gaps on both sides on that thing. But mostly it was a feeling of superiority and boredom with an inferior being

in the person of Diem. And I felt it was wrong. I found him a fascinating guy. I used to urge him to talk to me, because he knew so much about his country and with such a deep, sensitive feeling about individuals and history and why people would do certain things certain ways that it was very much worthwhile learning that right from him. Once in a while I'd get into arguments with him about things, and he would sit and listen, and say, "You thought it was this way, it's really that way." "Yes, but I talked to that"-- gradually, we'd bounce it back and forth, but very often I'd let him, "Please go ahead and talk. Please." And once in a while, I'd say, "Excuse me, I've got to go to the bathroom. I can't hold it in anymore."

G: Well, you were drinking lots of tea all this time, I suppose.

L: Tea all the time, and smoking cigarettes. God, the two of us would smoke all of his cigarettes.

G: What brand did he smoke?

L: I don't know, some English brand.

G: Oh, English. I see. I suppose the famous Vietnamese infatuation with Salems hadn't begun yet.

L: No, it hadn't yet. No. I didn't get that until I got back in 1965. Sa-lems.

G: Sa-lems, yes. Did you talk to General McGarr on that visit in 1961?

L: Yes.

G: What kind of impression did you bring away from him?

L: Well, I talked to him about some of his staff. He had a very fine group working on counterinsurgency papers. They were to be guidance and lessons and so on. But some of his best people were doing paperwork when they should have been out advising, and I told him that. I said, "Geez, you've got some of the best combat people I've seen in a long time who are here that should be out advising up with some of the divisions up country where they have contact with the enemy and they're working. I'm sure the Vietnamese would listen to some of these guys because they've been at it so long that they wouldn't be obnoxious in giving advice and so on. They know that there are problems on this." I don't know what he did with that, I don't think much of anything.

But that was mainly what I talked to him about. I told him some of the things I'd seen around country. I discussed the use of artillery and he said it was right, and I said, "A lot of that is prompted by the enemy getting the villagers to dig in first and getting down and then provoking fire. You're making enemies instead of friends that way." He said, "Well, maybe so." He didn't agree all the way with it, but he said it happens once in a while.

G: How good was our intelligence picture at this time?

L: It was good on South Vietnamese forces and personnel. Zilch, almost, on North Vietnamese or the enemy. They had some on that, but I remember trying to find out some things about Politburo decisions and some of the other things that were happening up in Hanoi and

getting no place on it. Now, I don't think they were holding back from me at all on that, I think they just didn't know.

G: We hadn't been very successful in getting penetration of the North?

L: No.

G: Had there been efforts?

L: Oh, yes. All my networks were gone, but they'd pulled them out. Some of them, they told me, had been subverted, taken over by the enemy, so they were going to pull people out. And they'd pulled them back and discovered that hadn't happened. I said, "Well, there are ways you know you can insure this when you communicate and we've got that down and I don't think they've been penetrated."

G: Well, isn't it pretty standard to give an operator a signal to give if he's been turned?

L: Yes.

G: They didn't pay any attention to that?

L: They thought it was a lie, you see. And I said, "What are you going to do now when you bring them all the way down here, which is a risky, goddamn thing to do, and it turns out it isn't true?

G: You can't get them back in.

L: They couldn't get them back, no. That'd never happen. They've been taken over, and they hadn't.

G: Well, if they'd been taken over, how could they pull them out?

L: Well, they figured the enemy had some scheme, you know, smarter than we were or something. I don't know.

G: It sounds like to me you're saying that we outsmarted ourselves.

L: I'm sure we did at times. That's human, though. I excuse an awful lot of things because human beings are doing it.

G: Now, you went, again, I think in 1961, this time with what was called the [Maxwell] Taylor-[Walt] Rostow mission to Vietnam, and there are a lot of stories about that. One of them is that there was a lot of resistance to your going along.

L: I think so.

G: What was behind that?

L: I don't know. Initially, I'd been warned off Vietnam largely by State, but also some with Defense. They told me some of the military didn't want me to go out there and get in their hair again. With that in mind, I'd made friends with an Israeli and I was going over to Israel, and had made a deal with the Israeli establishment to go in on all their military-political meetings in stationing kibbutzim and see how the parties would take up for them and so forth and so on. In other words, how they mix politics and military affairs. And they were very nice [in] going to do that, and they were going to send their attache from Washington along with me.

I was seeing the President on something, and I told him that. He said, "Oh, I want you to go out to Vietnam." I said, "To do what?" And he said, "Well, just to take a look for me." I said, "Well, yes, can I do that, then come back and then go to Israel? Because now really they're going to let me see some things that some

of the people in Washington are getting sort of excited that I'm going to get a look at. I'm sure I'm going to learn something that will be very useful." And I'd helped the Israelis in some of their other work in South America and out in Asia and so on, some of their advisers before. They were very friendly towards me, and I was excited because they were very imaginative people.

Anyhow, I got a call from Taylor the next day. He asked me to come on over to the White House and see him; he was sitting over there. I got over, and there was a meeting, and he was heading a mission out to Vietnam and I was part of it. I said, "I'm going to Israel." He said, "No." So he made up a list of people going with him. There were seven or eight on it, I forget how many in the party, and he had a line drawn across the list just above my name. I said, "What's that line?" And he said, "People above that get in to see presidents and everything and the others are working parties." So I was working party.

G: But you were officially a member of the mission?

L: Yes, yes. So I became that. Flying out, he said, "Everybody give me a list of things that you think you're qualified to look into." So I did. I gave him a long list where I knew people and figured just a brief visit and I could really get to the bottom of things in some of the current problems out there. And I gave my list. So he sat and looked all over the lists and he said, "I want you to figure out a defense line up at the parallel there so that we can

put all the American genius to work and have an electronic line or something across the boundary and then down Laos and Cambodia.

G: The whole border?

L: Yes. The whole border areas there, an electronic defense.

G: Against infiltrators, I suppose.

L: I said, "That's not my subject. I'm no good at that. I'll try it, but that's sort of a waste of my time out there." And he insisted I do that. I went up to MAAG and gave them the task. I said, "You guys are good at figuring it out. This is going to cost us several billion dollars. Tell me how many billions and I'll report it in."

And I was trying other things, how to motivate the Vietnamese into doing things for themselves and turning some of it around politically and psychologically.

G: How much did you get to see?

L: Not very much. Not very much. See, we'd gone in--I wasn't supposed to see President Diem, so we got to the airport and the reporters were all talking to Taylor, and Taylor was talking to them, and a guy came up from the palace and said, "President Diem wants to see you immediately." I said, "Geez, I'm not supposed to, you know." So I finally got Rostow, and I said, "Diem wants to see me and I think I'd better go up and see him." But he hadn't wanted that long, so I went up anyhow. I got in and Diem said, "What's he like? What's he want? What's he going to ask me?" "I don't know. You

can handle yourself all right on this." Then he asked me, "I asked for troops, American troops." I said, "Have you reached that point in your affairs now that you're going to need that to stay alive?" He said, "I shouldn't have asked you that, should I?" I said, "Answer my question." And his brother Nhu was there, and Nhu started sounding off: "This is to stabilize--" something or some crap[?]. I said, "I asked your brother this, and I want to know for sure." And they said, "Well, no." I said, "Well, stay with that then." Because I was against the U.S. troops going in like that in combat.

G: What were your reasons?

L: I'd seen the French there and I figured we'd do much what the French did. Even with good intentions and everything, we'd be dirty foreigners. It was a country that didn't get along well with foreigners and they came [as] friendly foreigners.

G: You seem to have managed pretty well.

L: Well, I laughed with them, not at them, ever. Something happened years after that. I went up to check with the marines what they were doing up with pacification up in their area. And they went out to show me what they were doing with the villages along their line just below it in sending out medical supplies and other things.

G: Was that the County Fair program?

L: No, this was before that. This was some marine pacification thing. Very good, very good. We were walking along a trail up the village and one of the marine generals was leading and their staff, and I

was ambling along after them. And the marines, bless their hearts, were trying to speak Vietnamese, and they'd shout out in parade ground voices and say hello to them in Vietnamese. The villagers were all taking deep breaths to get a parade ground voice, see, to answer. They were all in their houses, and they'd yell back, and this struck me as funny. So I started laughing and grinning, and the villagers saw me and they started laughing and pretty soon they joined me on the trail. We were going along and watching this exchange of hellos in Vietnamese, and the marine general said, "How'd you do that?" And I said, "Do what?" He said, "You're walking along back of us not saying a thing, and you and all the villagers are in a big group laughing together and you're sharing some joke. What is it?" I said, "I'm not going to tell you on that thing. You're doing something that's very right, and I want you to please keep on doing it. We just have a joke among us." "Oh," he said. He was really puzzled.

G: Do you remember which general that was?

L: No. He was a one-star. He wasn't the commander up there. It was a guy in charge of the sector or the work, or something. I forget which one it was.

You don't need language to communicate, you know.

G: Let me stop you there, General, I hate to.

Tape 2 of 2

G: When the last tape finished, you were talking about the Taylor-Rostow mission and the fact that you were given an assignment to

report on the feasibility of an anti-infiltration barrier. You indicated you didn't think much of that assignment.

L: Well, some things. We sat in Baggio and wrote the report afterwards, and I don't know what I had in my report. We got to the Philippines and I'm not on official duty all of a sudden.

G: Oh, really?

L: So my friends heard I was there. They came up and Taylor was going down to Manila to see the ambassador and asked if I could accompany him. The ambassador said, "Yes, bring him right to the embassy." And they wouldn't let me out of the embassy grounds.

G: Why was that?

L: Oh, you know. A guy who'd start a revolution and everything at the drop of the hat or something. The funny thing was, we went down to Manila, and Taylor drove with the ambassador and I drove in another car, and the ambassador's driver came over afterwards and said, "This is what they were talking about," and reported all their conversation to me. "I don't want to know," I said. "You ought to know this."

G: This is a Filipino driver?

L: Yes, yes. And I was just thinking, "so much for security." They made me stay around the embassy and they had a coffee shop there. I went over to the coffee shop, and Filipinos were coming in from Manila into the embassy and into the coffee shop to see me. So they finally saw I was causing too much of a commotion there. It was jammed with Filipinos and this was for Americans that were

working at the embassy. And I said, "They're just drinking coffee here is all."

G: Did you participate in writing the report?

L: Yes, I did and I don't remember what all I put in there.

G: Did you get to see the final report in its entirety?

L: I don't think so. I don't think I got to see it. We got to Washington and we reported in to Kennedy that we were back. He asked me to stay over and it was then he gave me Mongoose, that same meeting. He said, "Just stay behind. I've got something I want you to do."

G: So you never got to Israel anyway?

L: No.

G: You went to work on Mongoose?

L: Yes.

G: Did you continue to work on Vietnamese affairs at all after that?

L: No.

G: You were on to other things then?

L: Yes.

G: I see. I see.

L: Yes, they asked me not to work on Vietnamese affairs. Early on in the Kennedy Administration they'd had a task force chaired by Ros [Roswell] Gilpatric, the deputy secretary of defense, but with it a joint team from State and CIA and so on in with the Defense people. [We] would meet at Defense and they made Ros Gilpatric the

chairman as long as I was the executive officer. Then after the first meeting, Ros Gilpatric said, "Gee, I don't know. There's an awful lot of emotion on these meetings. I think I'm going to be too busy to go. Please take them over." I said, "Well, this is going to be rough on me, you know." So the meetings from then on, the State people would come in and I said, "I know, hearing some of your remarks, you don't like what I'm thinking and so on." I said, "You've got to say some things about me, so let's start the meeting. You get it out of your system. Say all the nasty things you want about me, and when you're through, let me know. Don't take too long with this, and then we'll get to work." And they didn't like that at all. They said, "That's just like you. That's the way you are." And I said, "No, come on. We've got to work here." So the main thing was that they decided not to have that system anymore.

G: What didn't State like about your methods?

L: I used to beg them to get down to the truth of things and forget personal feelings, and things that were secondary, to place them secondary. I said, "Keep remembering, we've got an enemy that's trying to defeat everything we're trying to do out there and let's go to work on the enemy on this thing and have some measures that will cope with that." I said, "This President wants to know what to do, so let's come up with some things on that." And they loved figures of speech. I remember one of them got up and said, "We need a policy that's like a two-wheel bicycle." I said, "That's

great. Now, what's a two-wheel bicycle got to do with it? And how many wheels does our bicycle have now?" And he said, "That's it, you're always spoiling our political thinking." I said, "That isn't any thinking at all on this thing. Come on, let's get something down on paper, a definite program that we're suggesting that we can all do and share in." So they felt I was very disruptive by stopping such--

G: Did you have anything to do with that counterinsurgency program when it was first promulgated, I think about 1960?

L: No, I went over and lectured at State on the thing, at their school. But suddenly everybody was a real expert on the thing. I had always believed that the United States, in going in and helping a foreign country, would help it and let it take the lead in things, and we'd just make sure they'd succeed and that they'd do things that made sense, that were realistic. They had a completely [different] idea, which is what happened to us in Vietnam was that Americans, as long as we were getting our personnel in and our funds, that we run things. And the allies, the foreign allies, who were facing the enemy, should stand around and be very grateful to us, you know. And to the best of my knowledge that is what really happened to us on so many things.

The Vietnamese would be told later on not to have anything to do with me on certain things and they'd come and tell me that. They'd say, "I'm not supposed to see you," including the President, mind

you, and the Prime Minister and so on. And they'd say, "What sort of people are you Americans, anyhow? You were always trying to figure out something to make us succeed on things. They're figuring out their careers, to be successful in their careers, and we know that. Why won't they let you go ahead and do it?" And I'd go to Ambassador somebody, and say, "This is what they told me on this thing. Please let me continue this thing. These people need some help." And they'd say, "Oh, go ahead and you help them."

So I'm still puzzled by this. This is so personal that I can't visualize any American doing some of these things that they kept telling me they were doing. Well, I can, some of them. Some of them they weren't very good Americans, I don't think. They weren't very good in service for their country.

G: Can you give me any examples of things that went wrong? You don't have to name names, if you don't like.

L: Well, I would get in very close to where key decisions were being made by Vietnamese and help them formulate some of their policies and so on. I'd do it with executive officers and others as well as the principals involved, and lay out a set of things and give them a choice. "What is the best thing for your country?" you know. "If you do it this way, it'd be cheating and your people would see you as a cheater. Then later on you'd want them to do something else and they'd just figure you're a cheater and say 'no' to it." Later on, the elections were held that way. I worked with both

[Nguyen Van] Thieu and [Nguyen Cao] Ky on the elections, trying to keep them honest. I'd get reports in that they were cheating and go to them on it and they'd stop. Many times they didn't know, it was subordinates, and they'd straighten up on the thing.

When Ky was prime minister, his executive staff was putting out directives on how to do things, including on my subject of pacification and so on. I was trying to get them to think in revolutionary terms, and actually he had asked me to write out some of the things and then we'd argue back and forth on this, whether it was Vietnamese or not. And a lot of them were, and they started accepting them. Then they'd come to me, and somebody in our mission had just seen them and said no. One of them--and Ky told me this himself--in a meeting with the Prime Minister, one of our top officials out there said, "Mr. Premier, why don't you let me write out your policies the way Lansdale does in a cabinet meeting?" Anything I'd work with would be up close with these people and I'd very carefully do it so that they wouldn't think I was originating anything, you see. It was, "As you said, we ought to do it this way." The guy hadn't said it, but he'd take credit on it right away. He'd say okay. But this guy went in and said no. The next time I went to see Ky, he wasn't talking to me, see. "You and your big mouth." And he told me what had happened, and all this guy did was to stop my being effective for several weeks until I made it up with Ky again.

But similar things to that happened, and they didn't understand human individuals. Somehow the Vietnamese weren't human beings to them, I guess. I don't know what it is. During the Tet offensive in town, our people got very excited and they were trying to get the Vietnamese to do some emergency things to get going. I put some of my staff on the team to help on the thing, just figuring they know the ins and outs around the palace and many other places here where they're trying to work and can help them. And I told them, "Be very careful. Thieu and Ky are very jealous of each other and aren't speaking." So the Americans, bless their heart, set up a Vietnamese task force to run the Vietnamese government things and put Ky in as head of it, drew up a chart and took it in to Thieu to show him. "This is the way we're going to handle your great emergency here," which was to tell President Thieu that he wasn't running the government very well and putting a guy who he was very jealous of in as head of it. Here the dumb Americans had it all written in. They came back to me and said, "Thieu doesn't like that." I said, "Geez, I don't blame him. It's a good choice on the thing, but you should have told the guy, 'You're so damn busy, you're doing such a great job here, you need somebody else. Who have you got that can do this?' and describe Ky and make him an appointee on the thing, is the way to do it." But they never were subtle in working with these people. They very seldom were. I can't understand human beings that are that way, I guess. I don't know, because it's so bad.

G: You went back in 1965, is that right?

L: 1965, in the summer.

G: Into what kind of job did you go?

L: I went as an assistant to the ambassador, because Cabot Lodge had asked me to go out. I was at the White House at the time working on Food for Peace, and he said President Johnson had asked me to go out. I said, "Well, he ought to ask me then; he hasn't." But he said, "He wants you out there. You'll be my assistant and take over pacification." They had a very definite idea on pacification, which was to be an American-run thing. The Vietnemese were to stand around and say, yes, I guess, I don't know. My thoughts were completely different from that. I was trying to get the Vietnamese up to snuff to run the program themselves. The minister that they had for that was killed shortly after he was appointed minister, and I just worked with him.

It started with holding a meeting in my house with all different departments in with him, the minister for pacification and the staff. I had just gotten the Vietnamese civil servants that speak up honestly in a meeting, and they had the time of their life. I remember one of the agriculturists was sitting near me, and some guy was arguing with the minister. This guy was saying, "Root, groundhog, root, root," or something like that. I said, "What are you saying?" And he said, "I went to the University of Arkansas, and that was our cheer." (Laughter) So he said, "I think this is great. I've never

seen a Vietnamese meeting held like this before. This is honest and you're getting everybody to really open up with what they should do. If we're going to work this way from now on, I think we're going to win." It just caught their imaginations like that. The next day the guy was killed. His plane was shot down, and we had to start all over again on the thing.

We got in working with somebody else. [Robert] McNamara came out right then and wanted to know how the program was going, I said, "Geez, a guy was just killed. We're just starting over again," and he gave me a Z for Zero in performance, you know, because somehow or another I wasn't doing it the American way and winning the war single-handed from Washington. Jesus.

G: Was that about the time when [Nguyen] Khanh was in, or was that later?

L: No, later. That's the military taking over.

But we got General [Nguyen Duc] Thang in after that who was excellent. He was a great guy. Thang and I became very close to each other. I'd spend a great deal of time over talking with him. They kept giving him more and more to do in the government. They gave him land reform; they gave him the first elections that were held, the constitutional elections, and we made them honest. We really did. He and his staff were tremendously proud of that. But they made him a super minister, and they used to hold their super-ministry staff meetings at the house from time to time. In one of them Nixon was in town visiting. This is when he wasn't running

for president or anything, he was just a private citizen, but he knew Cabot Lodge and was staying with him. He called me and asked if he could come over and have lunch with me, and I said, "Fine, but I've got a lot of Vietnamese over for lunch. I'd love to have you here but please sit back and don't say anything and just listen. I think you'll enjoy it."

So he came over. It was a cabinet meeting and I was explaining to him how they called each other by nicknames and so on. Batman was one of them, Robin, another one. They'd gotten it off our TV there and they'd thrown it around and there was a lot of joking, but a lot of work going on, too, very cooperative type of a thing. I used to let them go on, just once in a while throw in things. So I said, "Well, Mr. Nixon is here just as a visitor, but if there's anything you want to ask him to help you, I'm sure he'd be happy to." So they asked him about signing deeds for land in the South and were telling the problems they had, so he jumped into the thing and started telling them ways of producing paper in a hurry and so on, and deeds to land, signatures and signature machines. We got them some things to help speed that up.

But he told me after it, he said, "I learned more in ten minutes sitting there listening to these people. I'd never known before what the Vietnamese were like." He said, "They didn't even think you were an American or something. You were just a friend sitting there. I think that's great." And he went back and told

Lodge, "I'd like to come out here and work and be part of Ed's team, because I think what he's doing is the most important thing there is. It's a bridge with the United States." And I think there was some truth in that, and I think that's what I should have really been doing most of the time out there. Again, as long as I had an American audience that would listen once in a while, and sometimes they wouldn't and I'd get in trouble. But we usually go for the hard answer, the hard response.

Now, there was trouble up in Central Vietnam one time. And they had the struggle movements, the students of the University of Hue and the Buddhists up there, and they were taking to the streets and parading and everything. They were coming down from Hue to the port down there, and on the roads, and they were very angry at the general commanding that region up there, I Corps, who came to the U.S. right after that.

G: Was that General [Nguyen Chanh] Thi?

L: Yes, yes. And I'd just been up there talking with him because Ky was worried about him and a revolt or something. I'd gone up and Lodge had asked me to take a look, too, and see whether he was going to be leading a revolt or something. He wasn't. And I told him that. But when this was going on, I remember that [William Westmoreland] Westy was very concerned about the military situation up there and getting some force into Ky's hands so that he could take action against these students and Buddhists with troops in there. So that's

when I said to Lodge, "Please let me go out and see Ky. He and Thi are close enough--they were classmates--and I'm sure if we could get something like a carrier or something in a neutral place, fly them out there and give them a chance to talk alone, the two of them can settle things in ten minutes maybe between them, an understanding on this thing." So he said, "Okay, go ahead and see them."

So I went out, and Ky was just getting out of bed in the morning and he was in pajamas yet. So I talked to him. I said, "Ky, it looks like you're going to fight your old friend up there and that's a shame. You're both classmates and I know you've been friends for a long time. Do you think if you two get alone some place you could work out some of these differences and everything?" I said, "He struck me as being a very level-headed sort of a person and so are you." Ky was sitting on a couch right next to me, he had his head down between his knees and I figured he was praying or something. His wife came in. She was nursing their child, she was in a bathrobe. [She] came in and said, "Thank you for coming. He needs some help right now." I said, "That's what we're trying to give him." So Ky said, "All right, I'll meet him. I'll go on out to a carrier or anyplace else you suggest where the two of us can be alone." And I told him, "I think we can work this out."

So I ran back to see Lodge on the thing to tell him that. He said, "Well, Westy and I have sent some troops and armor up to"--it wasn't Qui Nhon, it was [some place]--anyhow, up to the area. So

they got some artillery airlifted in and some other stuff and fought these guys. Now that, to me--I said, "Geez, I told you what I was going to try to do. Weren't you listening? I've got him to agree now and all it takes is one airplane trip or two airplane trips and a few minutes and we can work this whole thing out." They said, "Well, too late now, you know. We've taken this other action." Both of them were very proud of it. They came out, "This is the way to settle things."

Okay, but I hope to hell we don't fight the Russians this way or somebody else, because it's thoughtless. It really is. We're a brighter people than that, and I'd like to see us use some of our wisdom on these things.

G: Was Phil Habib political officer there at that time?

L: Yes, he was. I very carefully left his name out. But Habib was very personally ambitious at the time, and this came as the next big step in his career. He made no bones about it. He wanted to be an ambassador when he left there. And I was in his way because I was doing something that obviously was his business. But he wasn't doing it. Nobody else was doing it. And I told him, "Look, my name has been made. I've got my fame. You can have yours. I'll help you get it, but please, we're in a middle of a war and we've got to get on with helping these people."

G: You found yourself obstructed, I guess, a number of times.

L: Yes, very definitely.

G: Now, you were in Vietnam for how long after 1965?

L: 1965 until the middle of 1968.

G: Until the summer, I guess, of 1968?

L: Yes, 1968. I stayed through the Tet offensive and post-Tet offensive, and then I discovered that in all the time we'd been in Vietnam, we had no tabulation of the political parties and factors in Vietnam. And I said, "Please, before I leave, let me put something together like that and leave it here at the embassy and you can use it as a guidebook and bring it up to date. I'll go into the histories of their political parties and membership and aspirations and so on." Which I did. I wrote, in effect, a political report with my staff. But the political parties really told us everything, and I was surprised at how open they were. "It's just nobody's ever asked us before," you know. They really did it. I was shocked that we didn't have such a thing in a country where politics was so sorely needed all the time, political understanding.

G: Now, were you in more or less the pacification business all that time?

L: No, no, they took me off when [Robert] Komer came in.

G: When Komer--

L: It was before Komer. The deputy ambassador, [William J.] Porter came in, and they took me out and put him in.

G: That would have been about 1966, I guess, then.

L: Yes. But Thang, who was head of it, of the Vietnamese, asked me to please stay around, and Porter and I guess Komer were with him, too. Several others weren't talking to Thang. Thang turned around, and they were saying something that he shouldn't see me anymore because

I'd just confuse things for him. And he turned around and corked him on the arm with his fist. He was a husky Vietnamese and he was pretty strong and hit him hard, you know. Tell him I was his friend and he was going to see his friends any goddamn time he felt like it, see? (Laughter) That was really funny. So they said, "Oh, no, you can see him, all right." So I used to continue seeing him all the time.

G: So you were at least able to stay informed?

L: Oh, yes. He was always telling me what was happening, I think. And I was trying to help these people because they were working very hard and bringing in a lot of things that needed doing. But it was Americans doing the things, and it continued that way up--I think what they did under Komer and later on under what's-his-name from the CIA?

G: Was it [William] Colby?

L: Colby. Yes, I think it was excellent what they did, but it was made in America, and they weren't leaving a Vietnamese program that could stand on its own. You had to leave these guys alone enough to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes and not make them feel that one mistake counts a guy out forever. They never got to the place where Vietnamese could afford to tell them they'd made a mistake, and that goes for the military as well as the pacification work and for the. . . . When Westmoreland left, I was asked by--oh, heck, the tanker that came in--

G: [Creighton] Abrams?

L: Abrams came in. And Abrams asked me if I had any thoughts to help him. I said, "One thing that bothers me a great deal is your checking with the Vietnamese army every Monday morning with the chief of staff. I know Westy does it and comes back and he used to tell us what conditions were there, and he didn't know. And he never knew that he didn't know." But I said, "Westy would go out"--and by that time security had become somewhat of a problem--"so Westy would drive out to the Vietnamese army headquarters with a guard of police on motorcycles, and jeeps full of guys, both Vietnamese and Americans with machine guns on the jeeps. Then would come a big limousine with the commanding general of the U.S. armed forces out there, and some aides and so forth, then a truckload of troops and then some more police and machine gun jeeps and so on. This great big thing coming on, it was a very impressive parade of might coming out. They go to the headquarters of the Vietnamese army and their guard's drawn up there to present arms, and the chief of staff is standing at the head of some stairs and out gets the American general. Everybody presents arms and the chief of staff salutes him and so forth and the American says, 'How are things going with you?'" I said, "What the hell do you expect a guy to say? 'Everything is fine.' You, sir, with your goddamned big array of things and your might and everything, we can take care of our own, too, see. You're demanding all of his pride and everything else to say everything is okay. So he never learns the truth on this."

I said, "You live fairly close to the guy. You know how to drive. Why don't you drive over in your jeep? You alone. You can take an aide maybe, if you want, but go up and here this guy'll be with a chief of staff with guards all lined up presenting arms and you return the salute and say, 'Is there someplace I can park my jeep?' All alone, and go in, and before he says anything say, 'I was sort of worried this morning.' Come up with some problem that you're facing and say, 'how are things with you?' 'Oh, General Abrams, you don't know. You've got problems. I've got worse problems.' And he's going to tell you something that you dearly need to know, see? So it's just simply handling people." I said, "Better yet, this guy lives over in Cholon and he's got a long way to come out to headquarters, past where you live and everything to get there ahead of you. So why don't you invite him to come on over and have breakfast with you and the two of you sit alone and have breakfast. Very informal. Get your servants out of the room and do this." So he said, "Hey, that's a good idea."

But this is the way it should have been done. All these are very simple things that human beings do dealing with each other.

G: What do you think the impact of the American arrivals in 1965 were, the beginning of the big buildup of combat troops? We got a lot of criticism that we were Americanizing the war.

L: Yes.

G: What's your feeling about that?

L: Well, the Vietnamese felt that very much. By the time I got there, there were Vietnamese jokes about the whole thing. One of their jokes, incidentally, on paving airstrips and so on, the Vietnamese were sure that they didn't have enough cement in the country if they'd get cement from another country. The Americans were just going to cement the whole country in and stop the war, because there'd just be cement there and no people left. They said, "Look at these airstrips. It's coming. Either that or we're going to have a superhighway up to Hanoi," out of all these airstrips, they'll put them all together. And I just wonder if any Americans ever heard that from them, you know? Usually guys were out watching these things, and this was what they were coming up with.

But the Vietnamese always have a reason, they're trying to figure out some reason behind and it's never anything that you think of off-hand. I said, "Where'd you get that idea?" And they'd say, "Well, you do this and everything, isn't that what you're intending to do?" "No, that isn't it at all."

I remember one of the generals when I first came in there in 1965, he had me over for lunch. Then after lunch we went out in the yard together where you get far away from any listening device, and he said, "Where have you got him hidden?" And I said, "Who?" "Diem. Don't you think it's time to bring him out again?" I said, "The best I know, the guy's dead. I wasn't in the country--" "No," he said, "you got the Russians against the Chinese. That was a clever move

that you did, and they're both going to be so busy worrying about each other that they won't help the North Vietnamese communists too much, and now's the time to really go for broke and everything." Now, this is Vietnamese thinking all the time, and I had a hard time convincing him that none of it was true. He was sure that this was the way we ought to be thinking all along. So we needed interpretations all the time of their things.

G: What did you think was behind the Tet offensive?

L: I personally think that their system broke down of political reporting, the communists. I think that they made their political cadre report in all the time of their work and how successful they were and so on, and I'm sure that they kept reporting and always were convincing more and more people every day. The Tet offensive was built around the theme that everybody will rise up and defeat the Americans and their running dogs. Of course, everybody didn't rise up; they weren't ready. But I think the political cadre had reported so many successes that they'd about convinced the people up in the North that the time is now to do it. And they made a very grievous mistake on that, and they weren't that way at all. And yet, I sort of have a sympathy for a lot of their cadre that they were smart guys. Geez, I'd wish we'd had guys as smart on our side in some ways.

I remember during the height of the Tet offensive there was a cadre working over in a suburb of Saigon, and he'd gotten a street crowd out there. He was speaking to them all, you know, "Rise up and

join us. We'll seize arms and take over" and everything, and the audience was very apathetic. Just then a bunch of American helicopters went over and people were saying, "Americans, Americans," you know, "You guys aren't winning" and everything and he said, "Oh, poor guys, we've taken Tan Son Nhut, the airport, and they're heading out to the South China Sea. They're going to drop them in the sea and they're all going to die out there. Those poor, gallant, young Americans. Say goodbye to them. They're going to their death." Now, that's clever. Of course, they came back and clobbered the guys, though. That's fast thinking on your feet, you know, when you get into something like that.

One of my people was listening to them over there and he was laughing. He thought it was one of the funniest things he'd ever [heard]. I said, "No, that guy is sharp." He said, "No. We killed him right after that, you know. We got fed up enough with his speaking."

G: What was the impact of Tet on the Viet Cong? You hear that they never came back from the beating.

L: No. They forced all their best people to go and sacrifice themselves in that. They really did, and had a tremendous defeat for them. It was. And a tremendous sacrifice. Geez, they put themselves in a corner and in a spot. They would get in an untenable position and just stay there till the death. It wasn't very good thinking.

G: Do you have any insight as to why the Viet Cong instead of the North Vietnamese? I think every place except Hue it was the Viet Cong and

not the North Vietnamese who went into the cities. Was that a politically conscious sort of move?

L: Yes.

G: Was that what it was?

L: Yes. They were supposed to be able to take over and start running things and be the brothers of the people, obviously.

G: And that was something the North Vietnamese wouldn't have been very well suited for?

L: That's right. That's right.

G: I wonder why the North Vietnamese went into Hue?

L: Well, their leadership and the southern leadership were from the center from near Hue, and Hue is a national place because of that. See, [Vo Nguyen] Giap and Ho Chi Minh and Diem--even Thieu later--were all from the same neighborhoods pretty much. They were born several miles apart from that, but all from the same central location. It has great meaning to them out there, to the Vietnamese themselves. About the only people that can really rule are from the center, and in their thinking they're somehow or other smarter or wiser or something. And they'll finally break down and admit that when they're talking to you. Of course, anybody from the North or the South doesn't really or he'd think he'd be a better president, but. . . . So I know that they defer to the people from the center on political matters when the chips are really down.

G: How was the pacification program affected by the Tet offensive?

L: Well, it was stumped at first because it drove some of the teams out that were in villages and so forth. They were murdered when the enemy came in. But the villagers themselves and the draft-age youngsters wanted to fight on the government's side. It was the first time that people were joining the army as volunteers, great mobs of them with their parents along cheering them on. I sent one of my Vietnamese language foreign service officers out to report on it. He said, "I've never seen anything like it. I'm just thrilled by what I've seen out there at the recruiting station. There are mobs joining the army with their parents cheering them. I didn't think it could happen in this country." Now, this was about the third day of the offensive, the fourth day, and they were still fighting over in Cholon where he was checking out things. They came to Ky, the youth did, college students, some of the Buddhists who were anti-government up until then, "Please give us weapons. We will defend our neighborhoods," and so forth. "These guys deserve to be stopped. We'll stop them there. They're over in our neighborhood; we'll flush them out for you." As far as morale, as far as the psychology of things went, it was a tremendous defeat for the North there, the Communist side. Just tremendous.

G: How long did it take us to get into the countryside again after that?

L: Not very long. Not very long. Thang was sent down to IV Corps, and they'd gotten into some of the cities and dominated the countryside and so forth. The ARVN was a little bit demoralized when it got there. By the second day, he had all ARVN headed out of town and chasing the

enemy out in the countryside and was in combat contact with them. A week later he'd pretty well swept them out of the area. But he got in--

At Can Tho, for example, the corps commander down there had the biggest house in the middle of town as his headquarters and he had barbed wire all around it, he had tanks drawn up to defend it and tanks had been used in the main streets of the city and so on. So he had it all cleaned out, and he told the troops, "The only place you're going to sleep is in your jeep or in your vehicle. All tanks ought to be out fighting the enemy and shouldn't be around guarding anyplace." And he said, "I'm going to be where my command truck is, and I'm going to sleep in the floorbed of the truck. Let's go." And he turned them all around very fast. He was from the North and I was talking to some of the Hoa Hao women afterwards who were saying what a great hero he was to the Hoa Hao women. They were telling me how good-looking he was. These gals really had a crush on this guy. I said, "No, he's a northerner. You don't like northerners." "He's different, he's different. He's okay." So I told him when I saw him, "Better not tell your wife, you know. You're getting along with the women down there real good."

But he left that command because he was very outspoken, particularly with Thieu. Thieu had put him in command there and he went in and told Thieu, "Put one of your own guys in there. Here are the ones that are good down there that are generals. Put some there," he said.

"Ever since I've been there, you've been calling up different generals and giving them orders without ever telling me. I'd go to give them an order and they'd say you'd already talked to them. That's no way to run an army. So you pick your own man, go through him all the time and, here, I'll give you the names of those that are good." And he gave him three of them. "They're very loyal to you," and so on. "They're good enough to be entrusted with forces. Meanwhile, take your goddamn command and shove it, you know." (Laughter) He came over and told me that and I said, "Geez, why'd you leave there, you know." "Well," he said, "the enemy's all out of the city; it's down in the countryside. I've chased them all out of the place." He said, "These guys are going to follow through on it now."

G: What happened to Thang?

L: Thang is here now in, he's with IBM. He lives in Connecticut. But he was a great guy. At the very end, he told me that Ky had come to him and said, "We're going to fight to the end." He was making public speeches like that. He told me when he got back[?], he said, "I'd quit the army, been retired from the army, so he told me to take command of the troops to defeat them[?] up in the center and so on. The government was changing all the time, so I went down and talked with the government and they told me, 'Sure, go ahead, we'll give you a command.' So I went home, seeing whether I could still wear uniforms or not, and I was taking some of them out and so on, and I called Ky, who was going to fight to the end and everything, and got his quarters and they said, 'He left the country already.'"

He said, that was the first shock, and then the second one was that the defense minister who had told him to take command of the troops had already been replaced by somebody else. He said everything was changing, and he checked, all the Vietnamese and Americans had left by helicopter. He said, "Our troops fighting up north of Saigon were in full retreat by then and I just figured I better get out. Maybe I'm the last Vietnamese left here." He said, "Goddamn it, you should have been there. I'd have stayed and fought if you'd just been there, and I think we could have rolled them all back up there across the line." This guy was a fighter, he really was. I said, "Well, I was in Boston at the time. I wish to hell I'd been there with you." But I felt if we'd just get one guy who could really fight, you know, he'd be in there and really take them. To think big, and keep going on beyond his boundaries. So he went down and got a boat from the navy--the navy had a small boat loaded with some family or something. So he got his kids and his wife on the boat and himself and they went down the river and finally got out to the fleet. By that time, I was looking for him. I was really trying to find him out on one of our fleet and they'd locate him there then and got him to--

G: Where were you?

L: In Washington.

G: Oh, you were in Washington. I see.

L: Yes. I was trying to get the U.S. to act, to do something to help the Vietnamese by trying to force a hand. That was a sad time. The enemy

was coming south right there at the end, and the Vietnamese around here were holding meetings in front of the White House. The press wasn't paying any attention. The President, Ford, was playing golf out in Palm Springs. And I went to a meeting in front of the White House and the Vietnamese asked me to talk to them.

(Interruption)

L: I figured out how to get a president to act, and we put him on the spot with the press in San Diego. I had some of the journalists here who were friends of mine, and I sent him some personal wires. He didn't know me, but it didn't matter, giving answers to his problem, you know, helping the Vietnamese get out, and some of the refugees--or who become refugees--got the press to ask some point-blank questions about that. He finally started answering with what I'd radioed to him, and we finally got some movement on the thing. But the New York Times had asked me if I wanted to write this--sometimes when I'd reach periods like this, they were very nice in giving me the op-ed page. This was a Saturday, and I said the press in Washington should have been aware of the pleas from the Vietnamese, and they weren't. I told them what we needed to say from there and what we owed these people and so on, and they gave me the whole page. I hadn't written that much, so they had a big drawing of the Statue of Liberty and the Vietnamese coming. It was a Saturday. A very big plug which they did which helped, too, to get some of the refugee programs going.

But I get ashamed sometimes. We were very negligent at times; our memories are very short. And they shouldn't be.

G: What was your reaction when Congress cut off aid to South Vietnam?

L: Well, that was very bad. It was shortsighted. I couldn't really tell what was the problem out in Vietnam, though, as the reports weren't that accurate coming from there. I didn't know what they had for fighting with left. The command structure was disrupted, anyhow, so I don't know that weapons and stuff would have been any good, but psychologically it was bad. We were just washing our hands of them at a time when they were in dire straits.

G: Speaking of the press, were you able to keep track of the American press coverage in Vietnam when you were back the second time, between 1965 and 1968?

L: Somewhat, yes.

G: Did you have any problems with it the way a lot of officials seem to have?

L: Oh, yes. I used to write letters to the editor all the time.

G: Which editor?

L: Oh, mostly the Washington Post. They sent one of their staff out and he wrote some good pieces and I wrote and said as much.

G: Who was that? Do you remember who that was?

L: I forget who that was now, but it was someone I could just tell from the very beginning that he was doing his own observing and thinking and so on.

G: It wouldn't have been [Don] Oberdorfer, was it?

L: No, I knew him. This was in a period after when he was out there. And the guy was very perceptive on what he was writing and I told the

editor of that. I said, "This guy's a first-rate newsman." And I got a letter back from him saying, "Too much of your stuff has been showing up in letters to the editor, so I can't print this." And I got him on the phone. I said, "I wasn't calling you to have it printed. I meant this sincerely. You've had some real jerks out there on your staff. Some of them have gotten prizes for their peachy writing. They're goddamn liars, and anybody that knows anything could spot that in their writing. But some of them are really good and work hard at their job, and do a good job. I don't agree with everything they say, but if they're honest in trying to do it, I'll go right along with them on that."

G: Did you ever cross Oberdorfer's trail?

L: Yes, when he was writing about the Tet offensive, I gave him some material. He never acknowledged it. But I had tapes of the radio messages and the taking of the embassy and so on. Our admiral there was listening to the radio and suddenly thought, "Geez, I ought to tape this historic moment." And he did, and he gave me the tape. I gave him that and then some of the other things that had happened as I'd seen it. He was grateful at the time, but I noticed when the book came out it didn't even mention [it]. Then he told some radio gal that all I was interested in was the book I was writing, which isn't true, because I'd finished writing it by the time I talked to him. But I think he did a very helpful thing in writing what he did. I don't know him at all, other than that.

G: Well, I just took a shot in the dark for no particular reason.

Who was a particularly bad reporter, or do you care to record that?

L: I'd rather not record that. I saw some of them in a very peculiar light. I was sort of an anomaly out there. They didn't quite understand why--I was always part of the establishment to them. Of course most of them were anti-establishment, so we had some troubles from the beginning, but beyond that it went over to a very strange thing. Most of them had their minds made up before they ever got close to Vietnam and just looked around to confirm their previously-held beliefs. Then some of them were very bad at that, including most of them from the New York Times.

Now, one of them from the New York Times--I won't name him any more closely than that, he became very well known--was in Hue during Tet or the retaking of Hue with the marines. He was evacuated out with some wounded marines and they were taking pretty heavy fire from the shore of the Perfume River on the way out. He was sitting there as a correspondent, a peace-loving correspondent, and one of the marines was talking to him and saying, "We're fired on, that's why we're shooting back, regardless of how badly wounded." He said the guy was very badly wounded and noticed his legs were all crooked, saw he had been shot through the leg a few times and was bleeding from the chest, and he was firing back and he died. He came in to see me after that, and he said, "I've got to talk to somebody. You know how I feel about the war, but

I picked up that guy's rifle and I shot back at those Viet Cong." And he said, "I can't tell my editor that, I don't have any friend that close here, my father's dead, and" he said, "please, may I tell you about it." So he sat and told me about that. Barry Zorthian called up and said he knew the guy was at my house. He said, "You can't get publicity all by yourself. You've got to go through me." I said, "Hey, just slow down, you know. This is very personal. The two of us are talking about something." He wanted to know what we were talking about, and I said, "That's just a personal matter."

This happened to a number of them. They'd come in and see me instead of seeing their father or something. They'd feel very badly about something, or something they'd written or said or done, so they were around all the time. And some of them would come in to argue with me about their own theories of what was happening and why didn't I realize that such and such was true, see, and why did I go around saying differently than that? And none of this ever saw print. This was all very personal to a great many of them out there. And I'd go down and talk about it.

So it'd become a very peculiar situation to be in, and I was that way with a lot of Vietnamese. Towards the end, the Buddhist students at the University--in Buddhism, the University of Saigon--were coming in and telling me when the Viet Cong were around recruiting. They'd come in to ask me about whether they should join the enemy side or not. I said, "You know I hate them and for good reason," and for these

reasons I'd tell them. "What do your folks say? Have you told your parents this?" No, they hadn't got up enough nerve to talk to their parents about it, but they wanted to talk to me about it. They said, "You always tell us the truth on this." I said, "Well, I wouldn't join them. What do you want your country to be like? Are these people going to get that country for you or not?" I said, "If they aren't, they can't work anything too well. They say that they've got a democracy up in the North and they aren't holding elections; they lie about that to their own people. I wouldn't trust them if I were you." So they'd tell me all what the cadre were telling them and it was sort of like Boy Scout meetings in camps outside of Saigon and Cholon they'd take them on. Then some of the politicians got that way--not in office, of some of the opposition.

One of my last days in Saigon, they got politicians from all over the country, from provinces and districts and so on, who came into Saigon and met up sort of near Tan Son Nhut and that neighborhood up there and the guy had invited them in to meet me, and they were to have lunch. But so many of them came we couldn't fit in the house even, let alone around a table in the house. The neighborhood cooked the food for the lunch and brought it out in the street and we sat out in the street along a curb and so on, having lunch. I was asking these people what they wanted for their country. I said, "I'm leaving here, and I want to know what it is. You're running for office and everything, what do you want to do? What do you want your country to

be like? I can't get any politicians to really make political speeches that an American would recognize as a political speech because all you want to do is be president and have everybody bowing to you and cheering and you smile and wave your hand at them and everything, but it doesn't seem to go beyond that." So they were telling me. And a guy would make a very stirring speech about his country and what he wanted for it, and some of the others would say, "Gee, I didn't know you believed that. That's what I believe and you and I have been enemies for twenty years. And I've fought you the last tenyears. If I'd known you wanted that, I'd have been right along helping you." I said, "Well goddamn it, you people better start working together or you're going to lose your country." It was a very moving meeting.

I got back to the house--I hadn't packed yet, and I was leaving the next morning. So in the middle of the afternoon I got back to the house to pack and the phone rang. It was President Thieu asking me to come in right away. So I went over to see Thieu and he said, "The police tell me that you're trying to start a revolution with all these politicians." I said, "Goddamn it, Thieu, you know what I was doing? I was doing your job. I'm a foreigner, and you should never let a foreigner do your job as president. You should do what I was doing." And I told him, described the whole meeting to him. I said, "Call in some of these people and listen to them. Give them some way of sounding off to you, and if they've got good ideas that could work in the government, do it," and so on.

So he'd listened for a time and decided he'd listened long enough. He said, "Well, I've got a present for you. I wasn't going to give it to you. I thought you were going to try and overthrow me or something, so I wasn't giving it to you, but here, take it." So he gave me a great big [inaudible] as a presento. And I said, "What am I going to do with this? I've got a small suitcase I've to cram everything in." So I had to ship it to the States. But that was funny.

And that night there were curfews, and Vietnamese students came over and broke the curfew. They came over on bicycles, over to the house. I had gotten angry with them because they didn't know any of the Vietnamese army songs, and they had taken the time out to learn the Vietnamese army songs and wanted to sing them to me. So they said, "We've written one about you, too," and they sang that. So there were about twenty, thirty students around there, and one of our admirals came by and said, "What's going on here? It sounds like you've got a big party." I said, "Well, the students are here. We're cleaning out the refrigerator and they're singing some. They're singing some army songs that they've just learned. Stick around with us." So he did, and I said, "They're also out, it's curfew, and they're going to get shot if they're riding a bicycle trying to get home. Can you take them in your car?" And so he said, sure, he would. So he took all the bicycles out and all the kids and crammed them in--and shuttled them on home, all of them. He said, "Well, you've got top rank helping

you on this." He said, "No, this is fun, sitting around singing." So I've got very pleasant memories of the people of Vietnam.

G: Do you ever get news of what the situation is like presently?

L: Yes. Yes.

G: What are your impressions of that?

L: Well, they claim that the people are ready to revolt and very strong feelings on that. And I think the only people who are going to take advantage of it are the Chinese, and I think there's going to be some Chinese support in there to people who don't want the Chinese anymore than they want the Vietnamese communists. They want the U.S. to help them, of course, but they said they're completely fed up with the other side. They said, "You just don't know how completely it is." And a lot of the old-time communists and the communist followers, they said the system doesn't work.

G: Who's running the system for the communists? Now, if the Viet Cong cadres were so decimated at Tet, where are the officials coming from?

L: They're mostly northerners, but they're getting new cadre and so on now. But all the old cadre are gone. They sent down--the troops were running things at first and things were so good they were looting all the time, and the southerners were getting away with murder with them. Now, apparently they're all civilian officials, mostly northerners, people tell me. And they're trying to be very slick, but they're despaired of themselves. And they want to get out of the country, a lot of them. Bribery has come in as a way of life again, which previous

to that, the cadre were supposed to be very honest and so on, had the reputation that way and now it doesn't. I don't see any truth loose in there, and I just hope the Chinese don't try an adventure there. I just hope not, but they might.

G: Surely the Vietnamese would unite against a Chinese move, wouldn't they?

L: Not necessarily. Not necessarily. Not if the Chinese were smart enough to stay just low in the background and get some of the nationalists. I understand they've already talked to some of them up in Peking and so on, people who've tried to get the U.S. to help them, and of course we wouldn't.

G: That kind of stands the situation on its head in a way, doesn't it?

L: Yes.

G: What would you change if you could go back and pick up a crucial personality or policy or turning point? What do you think it would be?

L: At this time? Jesus, I don't know. You'd have to take a geographic area that could be sealed off or something and sort of start building something there that you could keep alive for a time and then get it to grow as a widening oil-spot type of thing. And I don't know where such a place would be, that's the thing.

You know, we taught an awful lot while we were there without ever thinking that we were and the memory of that is being erased now, not only by re-education but by age. People are growing older and

have forgotten what it was like with the Americans there and so on. But despite what all I've said about the Americans being there and disregarding a lot of the Vietnamese, still there were so many of them trying to do good, some being observed and being imitated in part, that lessons were left behind there that were very good. Even the enemy, you know, still wants to do business with us and get some of the American goodies. They saw them around the black markets and everything in Saigon when they came in. And they saw some of the Vietnamese army equipment and are using it now. They'd still like us there to get what we have to give, our material things.

But a lot of the spiritual values are still there, even though we didn't work at it. We lived a lot of our ideals over there. A lot of Americans out in the countryside, throughout the country and not just leaders and so forth, but most Americans were living by certain ideals that rubbed off.

G: I had a thesis propounded to me that I'd like to propound to you and get your ideas on it. It was that we made a critical mistake in the early sixties--I think it was in the fall of 1962, after the Bay of Pigs affair--when we decided that the CIA was just not suited for paramilitary kinds of operations and that the CIA in Vietnam was required to turn over a lot of its paramilitary things to the MAAG. That if the CIA had just been left alone, they could have done in Vietnam what they did in Laos, which supposedly was a much more successful operation. What do you think of that?

L: Possibly. There are several factors that raise big ifs in the thing that make the theorem a little bit shaky. First of all, the size of the operation was tremendously different. CIA didn't have the administrative leadership there to field forces and things, supply them and keep them going without getting way away from the type of skills and everything that were needed to make successful forces. I know most of their station chiefs. Even with what they had, it was a bigger operation than any of them had ever undertaken before, and they were just worn out trying to stay abreast of what they had. I was surprised at--it's sort of nervous or tiredness or something--their reaction to some things that came about sort of thoughtlessly by them just as a reaction. Only tired men react that way. Some of them had been close friends of mine in the past, and they would get angry at things that were meant to be helpful, and I just figured it was too goddamn big a job being given them on some of this. I backed away from some of them because of that. I think the agency was never equipped to run a great big operation like that, but they could have done. . . .

On the other hand, somebody's got to do it, and that war taught us several weaknesses in our system that we've got to somehow or other fulfill or overcome or do better at, particularly against a communist type of foe, one run by a Politburo, an ideology, discipline and so forth, the way we were facing there. We haven't anything in the way of a psy-war today to cope with such things. We have nothing to cope with the disinformation programs that are coming out. We have no way

of handling the political challenges that are given to us, and we accept the communist enemy at his own evaluation of himself, which is a horrible mistake. We make him immediately ten foot tall and perfect, and they've got just glaring errors and weaknesses that should be exploited. I don't think we should go around just bullying them all the time or anything like that, because somehow or another we've got to be smart enough to get some friends among them and you don't do that by chiding them all the time. But I would like to see us taking care of our present weaknesses by getting something to at least consider what we do in these things.

But we've given up almost all of our organizations for psychological-political actions in a war and have done very little in replacing them or keeping some body together that can be fatted out and beefed up in case of emergency. If we only had a nucleus of some sort, I'd be a lot happier. But we've practically given up on what the psychological warfare people were doing and all the services, what Special Forces were doing. The people have left there and we haven't any nucleus at all to work with. The air force has got a little tiny camp down in Florida. There's a little tiny bit of work being done down in North Carolina by the army. There's a little tiny thing being done by the navy in San Diego, but they're the end of the line and nobody's paying attention to them. I begged them to even--up in Washington at least--to get some basis on a piece of paper, you know, "We have this. Let's help them from time to time, and so on." But people don't see the

need. And yet, geez, we go through and they run and everything, and let street theater just defeat us psychologically and let the American flag be burned by mobs and let the disinformation people blame the U.S. for almost every wrong in the Middle East, including attacking mosques and whatnot, which we didn't do. And we have no defense here, no way around it to answer any of it or to shove it down their throats again and make them admit it and stop it. That's pretty tough for a big, strong nation like ours to have to go through and live a Uriah Heep sort of existence when we needn't be that way at all.

G: How do you account for that, that attitude?

L: I don't know. I don't know. There're a lot of things that I don't understand that happened, and this is one of them. I've never been able to get people to understand the need for psychological operations to exploit weaknesses in our enemies. It's like--they can see a psychological operation to have for--

(Interruption)

Westy told me once, "Psychological operations are very good when an enemy is ready to surrender. You can send up surrender leaflets and he'll come in and do it when he's ready. That's a psychological [operation], and that's all." It's sort of a last minute type of a thing. I was trying to work up a big campaign at the time, and of course Barry Zorthian wouldn't let me touch any psychological operations. He said that was his and I said, "Well, do it."

So I went to Ky when he was prime minister. I said, "Hey, I'll give you an idea. Try it and then go over and get the Americans to

help." I gave him one on the Tet campaign to get the enemy to surrender by offering a special dinner, Tet dinner meal to them, when they came in. "It doesn't matter whether you do or not. Please try to do it to make it true." But I said, "This'll give them a reason to come in. They're disgusted by a lot of things, but give them something to make them think of home, the Tet meal that their mama used to make and so on. They'll really come in." And they did. We got Zorthian and others to really work on it, and we got an awful lot of surrenderees who came in. But they didn't even know that I had anything to do with it, which is okay. It's okay. But they wouldn't understand that, you see.

And I told President Thieu, "Just look what happened up in Hue during the Tet offensive. Three thousand people taken out and killed on a proscribed list. Most of them killed very savagely, buried alive and all this crap." I said, "You ought to start a slogan. In the United States we'd say 'Remember Hue.' Have you got any way of doing that? Put it down on your postal cancellations and everything to make everybody remember what happened there." He said, "Oh, no, that wouldn't help at all." That was it. He said, "I don't understand, why would you want to have people remember some horrible thing like that?"

G: Anybody from Texas could have told him.

L: Yes, yes.

(Interruption)

L: When I went over and tried to sell them on it, I said, "Now we've done that in a number of wars and I've got some statements. Maybe some of you are even old enough--'Remember Pearl Harbor' was one of them. 'Remember the Alamo,' of course, 'Remember the Maine.'" I said, "This used to stir us up as a nation. I'm sure it would here. Hanoi does it. Hanoi is very good with their postal cancellations and they send out teams to fake"--

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II]

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