INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: MURREY MARDER

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Marder's office, the *Washington Post*, Washington, D.C.

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G: Give us a little background on how you came to be the foreign affairs man on the *Washington Post*.

M: I actually started working on foreign affairs in 1948, when I was assigned to the State Department, and then was intermittently engaged in reporting on foreign affairs for a number of years thereafter. In 1949-1950 I had a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University and [I] concentrated on studying foreign affairs issues there--diplomatic, economic, and especially Soviet and Chinese affairs. Eventually in 1957, I became the first foreign correspondent of the *Washington Post*. We actually began on an experimental basis with bureaus overseas, and I was our first full-time foreign correspondent from 1957 to 1960, based in London covering as much as one person could, Western Europe and into Eastern Europe. Thereafter, I've constantly been involved in reporting on foreign affairs, traveling abroad, summit conferences, State Department, the Hill, wherever the foreign policy story developed.

G: I see. Now, Lyndon Johnson came into office with, one would think, a certain reputation where foreign affairs were concerned. A good many people thought that he lacked Kennedy's feel for foreign affairs. Was that your impression of him?

M: Well, Lyndon Johnson had a different kind of experience in foreign affairs. His was considerable experience at one level of foreign affairs, and that was at the legislative end, certainly. But it was evident to me, if not to others, that there was going to be a fundamental problem, actually, in his style of conduct of foreign affairs, for this reason: having worked in the Senate for a considerable period of time and having known--as he was then the Senate majority leader--his own style of operation was very much based on compromise and maneuver between opposing sides to try to draw them together. But he relied heavily on a Senate--on a political brand of hyperbole, and it was very effective as an intermediary as a majority leader, to try to bring opposing sides together.

But it was a style that was bound to get him into deep trouble when employed on the national scene in public, for this reason: [say] you have two opposing factions, and say they are relatively evenly divided and you're trying to get them to compromise and you go to each one of them and you say, "Look, your opponents really have enough votes to cause you deep trouble and to push you over the edge here. I think you better move toward the center, toward a compromise." And you tell the same thing in essence to the other side, [that] his opponents have enough votes to beat his brains out. And you drive and cajole and maneuver the two sides together. So you're dealing in a great area of hyperbole there, and Lyndon Johnson did it so much and he was so good at it in that style. But to me it seems from experience that it is very difficult, much more difficult than the public realizes, for

people to move into a presidential role or a secretary of state role and to speak with such precision that each word is going to carry a very unusual weight. And they're not accustomed to it. We're seeing it right now with President Reagan. It's quite difficult to adapt a general political style to [the] presidential style, where the world is hanging on each word. And that immediately got Lyndon Johnson into trouble in the White House.

G: Would you say that he was careless with language?

M: Careless with language might be one way to put--no, I would say not careless with language. I would say careless with accuracy, deliberately--it's a style of deliberate exaggeration. He'd say, "If I told you once I told you a thousand times." And it led me to write about what eventually came to be described as a credibility gap.

G: Yes, I want to come to that.

M: A classic example of what we're talking about here is that Lyndon Johnson, operating in the southern style of political expression, said in the Dominican crisis that fifteen hundred people were shot and killed and their heads chopped off. Well, that got reported as, naturally, "The President said that fifteen hundred people were shot and killed and their heads chopped off." Well, of course, nothing like fifteen hundred people were shot and killed and their heads were chopped off. This is an example of massive hyperbole, gross exaggeration, gross distortion of the facts. If Lyndon Johnson had been asked after he said it, did he really mean that fifteen hundred people were shot and killed and their heads chopped off, I would doubt that he would have said, "Well, that's exactly what I mean." He would have said, "Well, a lot of people were shot and killed and their heads chopped off,"

which happens to be untrue also. His facts were wrong at the start. But then they were magnified.

Well, this is sort of a most extreme example of it. And yet it was reported absolutely deadpan by papers across this country. I happened to be on vacation at the time when I saw it. Even knowing Lyndon Johnson well and his style, I assumed it was a typographical error in the *Washington Post*, which happens. So I went to look at the *New York Times* text and it also said fifteen hundred. Well, the chances of having the same typographical error in both papers were improbable. And then I checked the transcript, and of course that's what he said. A senior official of the State Department subsequently was asked about that, and he said, "Well, the President couldn't have said that." And they showed him the transcript and, well, that's what it said. And he said, "Well, I don't care what the transcript says. He couldn't have said that! He knows that nothing like that ever happened!" Well, that's an example of the kind of--Lyndon in an extreme form.

G: As long as we've broached the topic of the Dominican Republic, why don't we pursue that a little bit? Is he responsible also for the stories about the American ambassador crouching beneath his desk while the bullets were flying through the embassy--?

M: Oh, yes, that is, that was--

G: Was there anything to that?

M: The men involved didn't think there was too much. There were some bullets being fired, but once again this is like so many of the President's stories about the Alamo or anything else where he gets carried away by his very picturesque descriptive language. He was a great storyteller and to him these were all great stories.

G: Was he a good source himself?

M: Oh, I wouldn't--he was certainly not a source for me because I didn't deal with him at the White House level because of the way newspapers like ours are separated into compartments of coverage. He was a good source to some people, but once again, one had to be extremely careful to distinguish between what were tall tales and what were the facts.

G: Now, you mentioned how papers are compartmented. Can you give me an idea--when a Vietnam story, let's say, would break, how do papers divide the territory, so to speak? How do you work that out?

M: Well, it really depends a great deal on the size and the style of the paper itself. On a paper as large as the *Washington Post*, where you have White House reporters and State Department reporters, Pentagon reporters, economic reporters, it would depend on several things. It would depend on what the story was; was it a presidential story, was it a diplomatic story, was it essentially a Defense Department story? You might very well have separate versions of the same story, from different departments or one, depending on the magnitude of the story. There would be no simple rule for it. But, by contrast, on a small paper you could have one person doing the entire Vietnam War and everything else going on in foreign affairs. But here we're--we would be much more specialized than that.

G: Can we take the Tonkin Gulf as a case in point?

M: Yes.

G: You covered that story, I believe.

M: Yes.

G: How did that story develop? Do you remember any of the details?

M: Yes, I vividly remember it, because I have regretted much of what happened ever since. I'm looking here at a clipping from the *Washington Post* of August 3, [1964] and I don't recall a time sequence, but I know I worked very late into the night on that story. And I see the *Washington Post* here, as I would have recalled, carried two stories, to exemplify what I was just saying. Well, actually we carried more than two; we carried two major stories out of Washington. And one was the story that I wrote, which led the paper, which said, "An attack on a United States destroyer by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats off that nation's coast yesterday was reported beaten off by American sea and air gunfire in what Washington treated as a limited incident." And then we carried a story by our Pentagon reporter, who was then John Norris, which has a headline saying, "USS *Maddox* on patrol as attack came."

Now, what happened on this story was we had an announcement out of the State Department about it. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was on that day in New York, I believe, yes. And he made some comments there. So what I was doing from Washington was putting together into one story the major elements, diplomatic, political and otherwise, involved in that, whereas our Pentagon man was doing a military-type story about the geography and the forces available to both sides in the area. I know that this story went on into the evening, and [we] kept adding to it as we could on a fragmentary basis as information came in.

At first of course it appeared, and was so described by the United States, that it was an unprovoked attack on the USS *Maddox* in international waters off the Gulf of Tonkin. As the night wore on, those statements came into some question, because North Vietnam

had simultaneously issued a statement, without directly commenting on the *Maddox* engagement, which charged that before that incident the United States and South Vietnam sent warships into the Gulf of Tonkin to shell two islands, Hon Me and Hen Ngu, in territorial waters of North Vietnam. And this is an area near where the *Maddox* was fired upon.

During the night I learned, I think independently, perhaps before I was aware of that North Vietnamese announcement, that the United States was engaged at least by proxy in some of the activity in that region prior to the attack. Because obviously the question was why would--had--the North Vietnamese made an unprovoked attack on the U.S. destroyer, or had there been something which from a North Vietnamese standpoint was regarded as a provocation? This is an area in which I've specialized, to the extent that one can in foreign affairs, for many years: to try to look at an incident and try to bring into it the conflicting perceptions of the opposing sides and try to get as close as one can to the factual basis. If country X does something to country Y, was there a reason for it [or] was it totally out of the blue? And in this case, as the night--the more I explored this one, the more I became suspicious of the circumstances and questioned whether the information we were receiving represented the whole truth. I found out that it did not represent the whole truth, that it was the U.S. position that there was no connection between the two events, but obviously if you were sitting on the North Vietnamese side or the Communist side, there wasn't any clear distinction between the two types of events.

What I regretted very much, as the days went on so quickly after that and the incident got swept up into the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, is that we were not able to

establish more quickly the questions that we had about this incident and to have displayed them prominently enough that they would have come into the debate. The political action moved so quickly that attempts to report it were just overtaken, deliberately overtaken, by events. The administration was rushing the Gulf of Tonkin [Resolution] through the Congress and a couple of us were attempting desperately to try to report what had happened.

G: It occurs to me that there were a lot of questions about that second incident that much later came up, too.

M: Oh, yes. The second incident even raised more questions.

G: Were these obvious at the time?

M: Nothing was completely obvious at the time, of course, because the actions in the gulf of course were secret. So it was not a matter of simply going to someone and saying, well, "Tell me what had happened in there--in the gulf, before the *Maddox* and the other destroyers came in." Nobody was saying that. There were a couple of sources with deep misgivings about how the press and public were being misled, who were not in a position to tell anyone what happened, but to indicate their own disquiet, let's say, about whether the facts were all coming out. And of course they weren't.

G: Were these Pentagon-type sources, or State Department?

M: No, I'd rather still--even at this date I'd rather not say. They wouldn't be Pentagon sources; [inaudible] were in the diplomatic community. And these were not people who were telling anything. What happens in this kind of thing is you're calling someone, for example, and you're saying, "Well, North Vietnam says"--and you read them what North Vietnam says, and at this time you say something like, "Well, does this sound totally implausible to you?"

And they'll say, "Well, you know, it could be that from their standpoint maybe that's what they thought was happening. That might be worth trying to check into to see if you can find out some more about it."

G: There was another incident in the Tonkin Gulf about a month later, I think, in mid-September, which in some respects bore a remarkable resemblance to the second of the August incidents--the night engagement, firing at radar contacts, no debris on the surface the next morning and so on and so on. Do you remember being puzzled by that one?

M: I really don't off the top of my head recall enough about that incident to--

G: I think you wrote an article on September 26.

M: Let me look through here and see if I could possibly find it and try to sort out the sequence there.

(Interruption)

M: "United States forces were authorized in advance of the last Gulf of Tonkin incident to pursue any attacking planes from either Communist China or North Vietnam over their borders if necessary, informed sources disclosed yesterday." Whether that actually happened I don't know at this point, because an order to go over the borders would have been certainly a great departure, and I don't recall at this point that [inaudible] was actually given. This may have been either such an order or someone on the administration's side playing psychological warfare.

G: Right, right.

You were covering the Multilateral Force [MLF] story, I think--

M: Yes.

G: --for a good period of time, and some people have asked whether the administration was serious about an MLF, whether they really wanted one, or whether this was a NATO political game.

M: Well, the MLF is a very complicated story. Let's see if I can dispose of it this way. The basic issue in the MLF was the attempt to try to give some degree of satisfaction to those nations, notably Germany, which were believed to feel most put upon, in a second-class role because, in Germany's case, they were foreclosed from developing any nuclear weapons, along with many other types of weapons. So the objective was to give them a feeling of participation in the nuclear defense of the North Atlantic Alliance. And there was a great dispute inside the Alliance over the wisdom of developing any type of nuclear-sharing of the firing control. So there were several kinds of disputes going on among the allies and also inside the administration over the wisdom of such a move. One of the main arguments was whether or not Germany would develop an insatiable appetite for nuclear weapons and, if they were not given some kind of token symbolic voice in operation of nuclear weapons, whether they would be driven in time to abandon, renounce, reject their foreswearance of nuclear weapons.

To make a very complicated story very short, the net of it was the idea of some kind of a multilateral nuclear force, a seagoing force. The complications about that included the fact that it meant that the United States in effect was telling some of its allies, notably the West Germans particularly, that this would give them a finger on the nuclear trigger. Simultaneously, the United States was telling some of its other allies not to worry about this, it was fifteen nations involved, the odds of them ever reaching agreement on when to

put fifteen fingers on that nuclear trigger were pretty remote, and therefore there was no great--no extreme danger that this force ever would be used.

G: They had a fail-safe situation? All fifteen buttons had to be pushed at the same time?

M: It required agreement by the participants, and this was one of the fundamental problems in the whole scheme. The French were very opposed to the idea at any rate, the idea of giving the Germans any kind of a finger on the nuclear trigger. So you had people worried about it from different respects, some because it was possibly too real and some because it was possibly too phony. But it was trying to stretch a proposal in too many directions simultaneously, and it was like trying to use a one-dimensional formula to cover a four-dimensional problem. It just didn't work.

G: In January, you began writing about the problem of infiltration from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. Were you getting a consistent picture from your sources on the role of infiltration in the insurrection in the South?

M: Well, I'll have to stop you there and get some clear idea of, frankly, what we're talking about.

G: Okay, let me clarify a little. It seems to me, from my research, that there was considerable division among intelligence agencies and policymakers as to just how important infiltration was, and that at the bottom of that is a more fundamental question on what kind of a war it is. Is it a war of the North on the South, or is it war among southerners being fed certain elements by the North, or just what is it?

M: Yes. Well, it seems to me that it becomes necessary to clarify some of the basic reporting functions and how one operates here.

G: Fine.

M: It's not really a question of what a reporter in my capacity is trying to show or not trying to show, because in essence the reporter is not really trying to prove anything at all. He is simply trying to report to the best of his ability what is going on in a very murky situation. So what you're doing through these years is you're reporting what the government says, and then you're reporting--trying to the best of your ability to try to find out if what it says represents the essence of the situation, or whether there are fundamental issues which it is not talking about which could considerably change the picture.

You have to start from the premise that in a situation of conflict, nobody's going to be telling you the whole truth. You really better start on that premise in a situation of non-conflict also, that nobody in any situation in government is likely to tell you the whole truth about anything, because very few people will know the whole truth to begin with, and therefore, the job of reporting can be attacked from various directions. One is simply to be a recording of what is announced and the other is to be a reporter. And if you're a reporter, you don't simply record what was announced, you attempt to report. And in reporting, you were dealing--especially in a military situation where there is combat involved--in an area where you're just piecing together fragments of information as best you can, especially on something such as the infiltration from North Vietnam into the South.

Without having a chance to look back at the stories, there's no question that the infiltration was quite important. The issue constantly was how much of it was there, which is what the government was trying to establish in its own right. And of course the reporters

were trying to establish in a much more limited capacity what they could--what the government was learning about the degree of infiltration.

G: It seems to me that there was disagreement, and I don't know if this was evident to reporters, between, for instance, Defense Intelligence and the CIA as to how fundamental the problem of infiltration was. The CIA seems to have felt that what you had was basically a southern problem and then you had to solve it in the South. And the Defense officials were much more prone to think that if you could shut off infiltration, you would have gone a long way toward solving the whole situation. Do you recall any of that being reflected from your sources?

M: I would think, at that time, not with that degree of specificity about precisely--we would not have known exactly what was being recommended and assessed specifically by CIA in contrast to air force or DIA or other elements of the government. We were certainly aware that there was controversy under way about the level of infiltration and that there were different assessments. But as a reporter, especially in that period, one did not have access to precise information about what was being reported by the various intelligence agencies. You would know, depending on what kind of access you had and what kind of weight you gave to various people you talked to, that there certainly was considerable controversy going on.

G: I notice that subsequent accounts have put North Vietnamese regulars into the South by December of 1964, but apparently this had not been announced yet. In fact, I'm not sure it was announced until the State Department's White Paper came out. Do you recall--was that the case?

M: Certainly there was no claim of--I would not know the dates without looking back at them, but there certainly was no early claim of North Vietnamese regular units in the South, because--what was the date of the State Department's White Paper?

G: I believe in the spring of 1965; I couldn't be more specific than that.

M: Well, of course, even in the White Paper there were considerable--the White Paper was talking about some North Vietnamese coming down, and that was its contention, that this war was being supplied by North Vietnamese regular forces. But at the earlier stages one was dealing with a very murky situation. Of course, the press had no independent way of establishing any [inaudible].

G: Right.

M: One was totally dependent on what the government either knew or was saying, and you of course did not have full access by any means to what the government knew.

G: Then, in 1965 beginning very early, it seems to me that peace overtures became a major story. And there was some opinion that Washington hoped that the Soviets would be helpful in resolving the Vietnamese situation. What role were the Soviets supposed to play by our scenario?

M: Well, you have the change in Soviet command at the top, or in Soviet leadership, with [Nikita S.] Khrushchev being forced out of office and [Alexei N.] Kosygin replacing him. And it basically had been the hope for several years prior to that that the United States would be able to draw some benefit from the Sino-Soviet split, which was [inaudible]. Actually [it] had been under way in some respects since 1958, when the Sino-Soviet split started to develop, and came blaring into full force especially after the Cuban Missile Crisis

of October 1962. But by the time--and the basic U.S. objective here was to try to draw whatever leverage the United States could from the fact that the Soviet Union was postured in a less hostile attitude toward the United States than China was. Of course, one of the reasons China was in such a hostile posture to the United States was the American refusal to recognize it and admit it to the United Nations. So during this period there was a considerable American effort to try to draw the Soviet Union into a more peace-seeking posture to deal with the Vietnamese war.

Then we come to the fact that Kosygin then goes to Hanoi as the new leader of the Soviet Union, replacing Khrushchev, and this was a very significant turning point, actually, in the Soviet perspective of the problem. This was only dimly perceived in Washington at that time. Some of us who followed the triangular relationship, U.S.-Soviet-Chinese, were much more sensitive and aware of it than most people in the government were. The American specialists on the Soviet Union were quite conscious that this was a very significant point for the future pattern of U.S.-Soviet relations. Llewellyn Thompson certainly was, and Foy Kohler, who was in Moscow as ambassador at the time.

G: Do you think Hanoi orchestrated that February Pleiku business?

M: What happened at the time, and it was a matter of--it was one of these--it was a situation where you could see the problem coming. And it was like a slow-moving train coming at you, and it was going to force some kind of a decision. The attacks had taken place in Vietnam, attacks on American installations at Pleiku and other places. And Kosygin was in North Vietnam. So the suspicion here was that this was a deliberate attempt by North Vietnam to exploit the presence of Kosygin in North Vietnam to mount a challenge to the

United States, particularly. Well, that was one perception of the situation. Then obviously there was also the question of what the Soviet delegation, which was a very powerful delegation, which included senior military representatives, really was doing in North Vietnam at that time, and whether they had come to strengthen the Soviet position in North Vietnam or whether the Soviet delegation led by Kosygin had any interest in trying to move toward a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese conflict. There was a debate inside the government here, and I regarded it then, and certainly even more so in retrospect, as one of the most significant points in the early stages of the war.

G: Let me ask you a relevant question. There had been a significant incident at Bien Hoa on November 1; there had been one at the Brink Hotel around Christmas time. After both of these, Johnson was urged by some advisers to retaliate immediately. I think Maxwell Taylor was the most vociferous. Why did he let those go--the November 1 may be easy to explain, but why did he let those go and then choose to retaliate in February?

M: Well, one reason obviously is the cumulative effect there. The pressures were building up. And you had the whole question of the fundamental American strategy in the war. What was it going to be? Was it going to be an all-out bombing development, as urged upon him by many of his advisers? So he had the fundamental question riding there at just about that point. What was he going to do about the entire North Vietnamese--the entire war in Vietnam?

I vividly recall the night before the decision to retaliate, because those of us following the subject were very well aware of what the stakes were; they were obvious. There was a reception given here by a publisher for one of Bernard Fall's books. And there

was a--I recall speaking to a senior Soviet correspondent at that reception. We had been reporting, all the papers had been reporting that the question was, well, what was the United States going to do? Was it going to escalate the least level of retaliation? And I recall this Soviet correspondent saying to me, "Well, now it is your turn to back down." I was pretty sure that I did know what he said, but I wanted him to be more specific, and I said, "Well, you have to clarify that point. Just what do you mean by that?" And he said, "Well, during the"--he said, "I think you know what I mean, Mr. Marder." He said, "During the Cuban missile crisis, we backed down. Now Mr. Kosygin is in Hanoi and you've got to back down." Then I said, "Well, now I see what you do mean, but I think there is one thing faulty with your theory, with your analysis." He said, "What is that?" I said, "Americans do not believe in taking turns to back down." And he seemed to be quite astonished. He said, "You couldn't mean that the United States is going to attack while Mr. Kosygin is in North Vietnam." And I said, "I think that's a very distinct probability."

Well, that was the issue in the discussions, and Thompson did make the case in those talks, we were told at the time. I got a good briefing by George Ball.

G: This is Llewellyn Thompson?

M: Yes. George Ball--Dean Rusk was out of town and George Ball briefed us the next morning, in a background briefing. I know we asked him about whether consideration was given to the fact that Kosygin was in North Vietnam, and he said, "Yes, consideration was given to that fact, and the United States decided to go ahead--the President decided to go ahead anyhow." I know subsequently in my own research [that] American specialists on the Soviet Union regarded that as a very decisive development. Dean Rusk's position, as

explained to me, both as I understood it then and more clearly understood it later, was that here you had two adversaries both trying to do harm to you, and why should you distinguish from one to the other?

His view was, and evidently the President's, the United States should not stay its hand because Kosygin happened to be in Hanoi, that he was almost surely there to try to increase Soviet support to North Vietnam, which was one of the Soviet objectives at the time. They were trying to increase their own leverage in this situation, their own competition with Communist China. The American Soviet specialists' argument was that it was not necessary at that particular time to escalate the war, while Kosygin was in North Vietnam, that this was imperiling his personal prestige in this issue. That very much proved to be the case, because Kosygin remained absolutely furious, livid about what he regarded as a personal challenge to him. And that carried over, as I understand it, throughout the rest of Foy Kohler's time as U.S. ambassador in Moscow.

G: So that was a very crucial turn of the screw?

M: That was a very crucial turn of the screw. And of course the Soviet Union was trying to have it both ways in many respects. We've never of course seen the North Vietnamese records as to whether they in fact did deliberately set out to mousetrap Kosygin. But whether they did or did not, whether that was intended or not, that surely was the consequence of it and the irony of it--it did serve the North Vietnamese purposes. It didn't serve our purposes in the long run particularly at all. It served the North Vietnamese purposes. It polarized the situation; it greatly strengthened the North Vietnamese strategy of making the Russians and the Chinese compete as to who could provide the most support to

North Vietnam. So if it was not a deliberate mousetrap, it was certainly a nice windfall to North Vietnam.

G: Very good.

There were some speculations in mid-February about a peace probe from Washington using British and Russian resources. Did we believe at this time that negotiations would work?

M: So far as I'm aware, neither then nor afterwards were the people at the--let's see if I can avoid generalizations.

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M: I'm trying to sort out how I can distinguish between what I know and what I don't know, and I want to avoid sweeping generalizations. But there was never any great expectation by Dean Rusk as to what could be produced by negotiations at any point. And I would think at that stage, early 1965, there were no particular large expectations of it, but I would have to crosscheck, double-check [inaudible].

G: There are some items in the *Pentagon Papers* which suggest that at least one opinion that was held was that the North would have to suffer before it would think that it ought to come to the table, and that it had not yet suffered enough. And I was wondering if that attitude was at all evident.

M: Well, frankly, there were so many attitudes in conflict at the time, and so far as I am concerned, even at this stage there are so many missing points in the record of Vietnam that have never been answered. For example--and you may very well know a great deal more about this than I do--it is my understanding, from listening to Dean Acheson at the time,

that Lyndon Johnson had told him that his sole objective in the early stages of the war were to put in enough troops to represent a symbolic presence to give him strength enough to negotiate a way out of the war. Acheson believed that at the time.

Whether the President believed it is a question I can't answer. He may have believed it in one sense, but certainly not in the same sense that many other people did, because the question throughout the negotiations was not whether you were in favor of negotiations, the question was what price you would settle for. And everybody was in favor of negotiations in a sense, if they could get what they wanted out of negotiations, the same way that the British and the Argentineans right now are in favor of negotiation. So it doesn't carry a discussion anywhere to say, "Well, were you in favor of negotiations or were you not in favor of negotiations?" at any point in this whole process. The question is, "What were you prepared to settle for?" And some people believed that it was the administration's intention to get out of Vietnam as quickly as possible and that all it sought was a veneer to cover its withdrawal. And they believed, from what they were told by the President, that that was the underlying administration policy. And that obviously was not the underlying policy of many senior members of the administration.

G: Did you see any hope for negotiations?

M: At the outset, I took at face value virtually what I understood the administration's position to be, what they were telling people like Dean Acheson. I quickly, relatively quickly, came to recognize that what was being told to Acheson and others was not in fact a position that was held at the top of the administration. At the top of the administration, the prevailing view was that it was going to have to take a breaking point in the Vietnamese position by force

before anything was going to happen, and therefore that became an open-ended investment. The different concepts were totally at odds as to what was being talked about, what was intended by negotiations, and this remained a division all the way through the Vietnam War.

G: That would be consistent with the gradual escalation of the bombing, I think.

M: Yes, it was. And of course there were some people who genuinely believed that by escalating the bombing you would approach very early on a breaking point. Anybody who had seriously studied the history of Vietnam would have known that that was a forlorn hope. It was inconceivable that the Vietnamese, after having fought the French for so many years, would very easily bow to a little pressure from the United States. So I soon came to realize that the strategy was doomed to fail and that it was going to lead to a massive involvement of American forces. I did not spend a great deal of time in Vietnam, because I was obliged to be operating out of Washington, covering the diplomatic area.

But I was there in 1966 [for the] first time, and I recall reporting, as I was told by senior military officials, that the size of the American force in Vietnam was going to double and it was going to go over the three hundred thousand mark. And so [I] reported in the *Washington Post*. The story was ridiculed by official spokesmen, Pentagon and the White House, at the time. And [this was] part of the game that was being played on the American public, because what I was reporting was from the same senior military officials in Vietnam who were recommending that specifically, and that was exactly what they were recommending at the time. Anything reported like that was being flatly denied, that there were any such plans, any such intentions.

G: Did that ever draw a call from the White House?

M: A personal call from the President?

G: Well, either that or to the publisher or owner. He was known to do that when a story displeased him enough.

M: Well, frankly, I would guess perhaps that my reporting certainly didn't generally please him, so I was not particularly aware of any single story that he disagreed about. I was aware that the White House generally disagreed with most of the things I was writing, and was considerably indignant with all the questions I was raising.

G: Did he ever get the chance to tell you that himself?

M: Yes, once. Once when Eisenhower was visiting the White House and I was--I believe it was the only time I was invited to the White House while Lyndon Johnson was president. It was a luncheon ceremony--no, I may be mistaken--

G: I have a note there from the White House diary that may--

M: No, that's quite right. I was just about to say that it was not when Eisenhower was there; it was when the Australian Prime Minister was there. That's right. It was when Prime Minister [Harold] Holt was there. And that is the only time I was invited to the White House.

G: Well, I thought it was--

M: And that was rather a fluke, as a matter of fact.

G: I thought it was a little unusual for a reporter of your stature not to get into the White House more often than you were.

M: Yes, this was really a fluke. I can't recall the details, but it was a rather crash thing, some juggling of the schedule at the last minute and they needed some guests for this luncheon. And the President was very courteous, as he always would be--with guests around.

(Laughter)

And as I was leaving, he said, "Marder, who wrote that editorial in the *Washington Post* this morning?" And I said, "What editorial are you speaking about, Mr. President?" which irritated him greatly. So that was rather par for the course. If we had a conversation, he was bound to be irritated, it seemed. And he said, "You know damn well what editorial I'm talking about." And I said, "I frankly don't really know what editorial you're talking about. Was it the one about Vietnam?" He said, "Well, of course it was the one about Vietnam." And he said, "Who wrote it?" I said, "Well, Mr. President, literally I don't know, but I would assume that it was probably Russ Wiggins. He writes most of our editorials on Vietnam." And he said, "Well, I have a message I want you to deliver to Russ when you get back to the *Post*. Tell him that that editorial is worth two divisions to me." And I said, "Two divisions, Mr. President?" And he said, "Two divisions." And I said, "All right, I'll relay your message, sir." So I came back to the *Post* and walked in to see Russ Wiggins and reported the message. And, as I knew was bound to happen, Russ Wiggins said, "Did he say two divisions?" And I said, "Russ, I thought he meant two squads, but he said two divisions."

(Laughter)

So that was my one visit to the White House.

G: That's an interesting story. I think I've heard some of that. The two divisions part of it I've seen somewhere before and I can't--it may have been Chalmers Roberts' book.

M: Oh, Chal may refer to it, yes.

G: But I've never gotten all the details.

Where were the French in all of this in the spring of 1965? Where did they stand on negotiations and our involvement?

M: Well, it's really quite difficult for me to pick out a time period like that and have it go into place. I wish I had that kind of a memory, which I can't do. The spring of 1965--I just would have to relate it to--

G: Well, I can come back to that. I have another question, though, about that spring which may strike a spark, and that was that first bombing pause, a weeklong bombing pause, which was not announced initially as a bombing pause. Do you have any feeling for what the administration's real motives were? Some people say it was a grandstand play to pacify antiwar people. Others say it was a real signal.

M: Well, in each one of these pauses, you had mixed motives; different people had different objectives in them. And this was part of the complexity. For some senior officials it was intended as a real opening, and for others it was intended primarily to alleviate the public pressures on the administration's position. And I think basically the latter was the predominant factor most of the time. So far as I know, Dean Rusk never had any great illusions and certainly no great expectations at all about what was going to happen in any bombing pause. [Robert] McNamara, [Averell] Harriman, others did have some, and I would imagine, from what I know, that the President had a mixture of attitudes depending

on how optimistic or pessimistic he was at any given point. So much here depends on-- when one refers to the administration, it's always a question of what portion of the administration, what person in the administration.

Just to amplify that problem, I recall an experience with a colleague of mine, Victor Zorza, who's a leading specialist on the Soviet Union who was working in Washington at the time. And I recall at a later stage, he came in to tell me that he had a tremendous story. And he was about to write it that night, and it was that the United States was going to call a bombing halt. I said I didn't believe that was true, and he said he knew it was true because he had just been speaking to a very senior American official. I said I didn't know who he was speaking to, but no matter who he was speaking to, I didn't really believe it. He said, well, if he told me who he was speaking to, he knew I would realize that I was wrong, and he finally said that he had been speaking to Secretary McNamara. And I said, well, that's what I had suspected, and that's why I was pretty well convinced that he was wrong. And he was quite genuinely stunned and startled. He said, "Well, he's the secretary of defense," and I said, "Yes, Victor, he's the secretary of defense, but this isn't the Soviet Politburo. It doesn't operate on a monolithic basis. There are senior officials who hold very different views about it."

And he found it incredible that the secretary of defense would be in a position of advocating something like that, as significant, that wasn't going to happen. I said, well, this would be a good point for enlightening him about the way a democratic society operated in the United States system, and that was exactly what the situation was.

G: That's fascinating. That would have probably been 1966 or later.

M: That would have been later, at a later stage, when the issues became more divided at that level, among senior advisers.

G: A good many people made a great deal out of a speech that the President made in which he, in addition to outlining our determination to defend Vietnam, held out a carrot of sorts in the form of developing the economic resources of Southeast Asia. How serious was he about that, do you think? Was he really going to dam the Mekong and provide all those resources?

M: I would think that the President was very serious about that, because that was very much in his political concept of how you operate at a political level, that the international scene was simply an enlarged version of the domestic scene, that politics was politics, and you could have compromises at the international level very much like you had them at the domestic level. I believe this was one of those fundamental misfortunes in the American approach at the time, that international politics does not necessarily operate that way. Of course, you have trade-offs, and to a considerable degree there is a similarity between domestic and international politics.

But there are also fundamental issues of nationalism and prestige that will just override any kind of political trade-off situation, as we're seeing right now, for example, just to take the current crisis, British-Argentinean. So what was lacking--and maybe the President in his inner consciousness could understand it or came to understand it--is that there was nothing you could offer the Vietnamese that would override their determination and their belief that this was their country, that the North Vietnamese were entitled to it. So there was no price and there no amount of material inducement that you could lay on the

line that was going to shake them out of that. You had to deal with that fundamental problem in some direct way.

And I would think that this probably came as one of the great causes of dismay to the President, because I do think that he was genuinely sincere in his belief and desire to develop the Mekong. And I've heard him talk about it, that kind of approach in earlier times, and was aware of his belief that if you could bring well-drilling equipment into Asia and uplift the farmers' situation, or give them seeds and fertilizer and so on. So I have no question at all that this was a genuine belief on the part of the President. But I don't believe he--I see no evidence that he ever did get through his consciousness the degree of fixation by the Vietnamese on their history, on their concepts.

This is where you have the great division between the analysts at the expert level and the people operating at the strategic level. The analysts at the expert level who knew the psychology and the sensitivity and the priorities of Vietnamese, of Asians, who knew the Asians' psyche and consciousness, and those who didn't. And I saw this happen unfortunately to the President in many instances. I recall when I was in Vietnam in 1966, the Asians learned how to manipulate him; he never learned how to manipulate the Asians.

When [Nguyen] Cao Ky was making a speech aimed at the United States expressing the South Vietnamese position in such a way that he would draw additional support from the United States, that speech was prepared a very simple way. They sent over to the American Embassy and asked for and got the texts of all the American speeches by the President, by Rusk and others, and pieced together their speech using portions of Johnson's speeches. And Johnson--he records in his memoirs that he was just delightfully

flabbergasted to see the Vietnamese telling him exactly what he believed should be done. They were using his own words! So he found a concurrence of views with them and believed that he had struck rapport. He had no idea, did not understand. His subordinates all knew what happened, but nobody tells the emperor that he doesn't have any clothes.

G: That's a fascinating story. I hadn't heard that.

What was the bombing supposed to accomplish? You've partly answered this, but there was, it seems to me, a rather significant disparity of views in the administration on what the real target was.

M: Well, I can recall one conversation with a very knowledgeable fellow who at an early--John McNaughton--

G: Now dead, I believe.

M: --now dead, who was very sophisticated and one of the brightest people at the Pentagon. I recall one day--and I don't remember the date on it, though; it was at a mid-stage in the war while the United States was attempting to develop various bombing patterns to cut off the infiltration. We were having lunch at the Statler. I would try to see him occasionally because he was very bright and very knowledgeable, a former newspaperman. And Chal Roberts and I would have lunch with him occasionally. One day John came in very excited and he said they'd solved the problem of infiltration, and I was astonished and I assume Chal was. And we said, "Well, how?" And he said, "It's very simple." He picked up a napkin and he drew two intersecting lines on this napkin, and Chal and I looked at it and said, "Well, that's very interesting. What does it mean?" He said, "Well, isn't it clear?" And I said no, it sure wasn't clear to me at all. And he said, "Well, it's very simple. We

have these two lines here. One is infiltration and the other is the bombing. As you increase the bombing, the point comes at which it intersects with the level of infiltration and cuts it off." I said, "I don't believe it." And he said, "Well, challenge it in theory." I said, "I'm not even going to begin to challenge it in theory. I've been involved in that kind of warfare as a marine in the South Pacific and been involved with infiltration and had been infiltrating other people's territory." And I said, "I just do not find it credible that you could with bombing completely cut off the infiltration." He was quite exasperated because he was convinced it was an absolutely unchallengeable theory which was going to be carried into practice. But there were people approaching the problem at that dimension and with intense thought and analysis, and of course that's what happened to McNamara. The most elaborate analytical theories could not be converted into reality on the battlefield.

G: What about the people who wanted to raise the level of pain in North Vietnam until they would simply give up?

M: Well, it did seem to me certainly then, and certainly more so afterward, that the United States had boxed itself in. If it was going to respect the frontiers of China and allow sanctuary there--if its concern was going to be that it must not take action which could run the risk of war, of a wider war, bringing in China and/or the Soviet Union, then the question was going to be exactly where it drew the line as to how much bombing it could engage in without touching off that large a war. And that became the critical--certainly one of the critical calculations.

It always seemed to me that the fundamental philosophy [or] strategy of the war was fundamentally flawed for lots of reasons, but one of the main reasons was [that] Johnson,

the President, prided himself on his ability to introduce progressively such a large force in Vietnam without triggering a wider war. Well, of course, what he was doing in the process that didn't register with him was--this is like adapting yourself to inoculation. Of course, it gave North Vietnam a chance to adapt to this increased level on a gradual basis. Of course, his great concern was that if he introduced a large force that he would push it over the edge, but in the process the strategy was defeating its own purpose. It was allowing North Vietnam to become adapted to the full-scale war. Frankly, my own view is that--after having visited North Vietnam at the beginning of 1973, right after the bombing before the cease-fire--North Vietnam from the outset was prepared to be, quote, "bombed back into the Stone Age." This was the fundamental dilemma, fundamental problem with American strategy. [The] North Vietnamese believed what the United States in its most extreme form said it had the capacity to do, so North Vietnam was prepared to be virtually obliterated on the surface. That's why its factories had been dispersed and gone underground. And it was psychologically prepared for an almost obliterating form of bombing.

So to me all the theories are questionable as to--no matter what you did to North Vietnam, I would not want to have anticipated that any level of bombing could really have drastically changed that situation. I would estimate that you would have had to physically control North Vietnam, put troops on into North Vietnam and actually occupy the country to end this ability to fight. It was not going to break off at any discernable point that I could see, because it had the capacity to bleed its two allies indefinitely--China and the Soviet Union. All the theories that one hears even in retrospect about if there had been all-out bombing, well, I don't believe that would necessarily have changed, unless you were

prepared to go to occupation of North Vietnam and completely dominate--well, it rambles on too much.

G: In the spring there was a series of stories reporting great outrage caused in other nations by the use of riot-control agents in Vietnam. Were U.S. officials surprised at the level of outrage that this created?

M: Certainly people at the top of the State Department were quite surprised at the furor. Dean Rusk regarded it as illogical that this outrage was developing, because, as he argued--and the record would show that--his contention was that it was a more humane form of controlling riots, disturbances, even enemies, than shooting them. But there unquestionably was a lack of awareness or sensitivity in Washington about the psychological sensitivity to chemical warfare in Europe. This is a problem one has in many areas, certainly of military activity and diplomatic activity. It is not simply what is sensitive to your population, it's what is sensitive to your allies as well. And of course, in the case of Europeans there is a fundamentally different historical memory about chemical agents in warfare and mustard gas and other means of chemical warfare. It quickly became evident to American officials that this was a matter that was going to have considerable explosive potentiality from a psychological warfare standpoint.

G: We know now that in April a decision had been made that the marines were going to be allowed to participate in active combat, although the large commitment of troops had not yet taken place. And I think on the third and the fourth you had some stories noting that there were more trips going, and I quote, "including about a thousand more men for guard duties," unquote, but that officials emphasized that there was no, quote, "no present

intention to alter the course of U.S. policy or strategy in Vietnam," unquote. And I was curious, as the course of events rolled on in Vietnam, whether that was a contribution to the credibility gap thesis that you developed later that year.

(Interruption)

M: This would be at that point where the question arises, as I mentioned earlier, mainly whether the administration really was planning to do what Lyndon Johnson was telling Dean Acheson and others, namely to put in enough troops for prestige purposes to be able to strengthen the United States' hand enough to try to bargain a way out diplomatically. What was happening, of course, is [that] as each increment was going in, it was raising questions about where the breaking point was. At this stage, those of us who did not have access to the administration's secret plans and the projected rationing obviously could only be guessing as to where it was going at each point of the process. While we could be raising questions about it, unless you knew what the underlying motive was, you could not be sure.

[This] is one of the fundamental reasons why I would take drastic issue with the claims, say, of Walt Rostow that the *Pentagon Papers* did not disclose anything substantially new because if you go back and read the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, you can find virtually all of these things in there. And therefore they were known to the press, and therefore nothing of great consequence was concealed from the American public. [This is] just a grossly misleading representation of what was happening and a totally untenable theory. Because it makes all the difference in the world as to whether the press is speculating about what the government might be doing or about what the government might be concealing, and being able to report factually, without equivocation,

without challenge, that this is what the government is doing. So to look at those stories retrospectively and say, well, when you look at them they're all there--well, many of the points were there but were being furiously denied at the time. And it was a reporter's individual credibility and veracity that was under question, which puts the thing in an entirely different light retrospectively. You've got to go back and see what was happening to the statements and declarations about what the administration was doing in order to form a judgment as to what the public knew and didn't know. Simply putting something into the public domain does not mean that it's automatically accepted.

G: I recall a rash of stories at about this time speculating--asking questions of officials as to whether the dispatch of these first small units of combat troops didn't represent a fundamental departure, and the answer always was, "There has been no change in policy or mission." And that was true, I think, right up through July.

M: Oh, that was true to the end of the war, that was true to the end of the war. No administration ever admitted that there was any change of policy in Vietnam from going from zero, virtually, to half a million men. Because each administration was drawing on what its predecessor did as constituting its rationalization, as Lyndon Johnson repeatedly did in citing what Eisenhower had said and selectively citing what others had done, which has been the practice in each administration. It's a dilemma when you have an undeclared war. No administration's going to say, "Yes, by God, we are changing strategy and we are now embarked on a new policy, which is of engaging in a war," because that is the pattern that we had fallen into, because, after all, Korea was not a declared war either. So we're in a

series of progressive developments of policy without any acknowledgement [that] the policy had ever changed.

G: Do you want to talk about the Dominican Crisis? I'm completely flexible.

M: The initial reason for intervening was going to be to keep the Dominican Republic from falling into, as it was said, the pattern of another Cuba. That was the original request. The solicited request for American troops originally said that. The American ambassador on the scene was told to go back, that that was not the reason the United States wanted to use at that time--to go back and get from the military authorities in the Dominican Republic a different request, and this request would be to save American lives.

G: Was this the one that was circulated a week after the intervention then?

M: Yes, yes. So actually they shifted signals about the rationalization for the whole war just before the troops went in.

G: We've mentioned some of the hyperbole that you referred to. How would you rate the performance of those two players, Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker and General [Bruce] Palmer in the Dominican Republic?

M: I really would not be in a good position to make that evaluation. The only thing I would be able to say about the Dominican thing is sort of the obvious. Fortunately, it has turned out much better than it could have been, and the United States did succeed in saving a considerable degree of democratic diversity in the Dominican Republic through its efforts. [It] caused great consequences in its relationships with Latin American countries at the time, and some of those problems have rebounded.

G: What was the impact on the OAS [Organization of American States], do you think?

M: The impact on the OAS was that the United States would do pretty much what it wanted to do and inform them later, even though legally there was coordination. There was, quote, "consultation," but actually it was after the fact that the United States had decided what they wanted to do, the consultation was after the fact. I know of [a] State Department official during the planning stages of the operation, who raised a question in a private meeting of the necessity to consult with the OAS, [and] who was looked upon as an extremely naive fellow. Everyone in the room turned and glared at him for suggesting that the United States in preparing what it should do should consult with the OAS. But I really would not be in any position to comment specifically about individual--

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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