INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT J. McCLOSKEY

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Ambassador McCloskey's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Could you give us an outline of the occasion upon which you entered the Foreign Service? What led to that?

M: I had been working as a newspaper reporter for a medium-sized daily in Pennsylvania and felt that I wanted to go abroad. I wanted to go abroad as a correspondent. At the time, among other subjects and people, I was covering Congressman Francis E. Walter, who was from that part of Pennsylvania, who suggested I come to Washington and look into the Foreign Service or the U.S. Information Agency, and I did that. After much back and forth, I was taken on by the State Department in a temporary position in the Foreign Service that was related to the refugee relief program, a program governed by legislation that kept it in effect for three years. I went to the Far East, to the American Consulate General in Hong Kong, and that led to a return assignment to Washington in a somewhat dull job where I was dissatisfied until I was offered one in what was then called the News Office of the Department of State. I stayed in that office in various capacities for the better part of fifteen years, the last ten of which I was the official spokesman for the

department. I was regularly encouraged by service officials to apply for the regular Foreign Service, which I did, and was integrated as a Class I officer in 1967.

G: Did you have a philosophy of public relations that you used as guidelines in that position?

M: I won't pretend to have possessed any brilliant philosophy, other than that I had been around that office long enough to realize that what was really required of you was to serve two masters. That is to say, I took very seriously the responsibility of the government to respond to public inquiry, and I felt that the press corps that covered the Department of State at that time, in addition to being day-to-day reporters, were people who by avocation were pretty good students of foreign policy themselves. They had an institutional memory. I found, on the whole, that at that time they were people who asked questions on fair subjects. As the press corps there grew, it gathered in people who I often thought had rather questionable credentials. But it was the beginning of the period of advocacy journalism and, you know, you took them as they came.

G: Who were some of the good reporters from that period?

M: Oh, the best are really no longer there. John Hightower was the senior Associated Press correspondent. Stew [Stewart] Hensley was the senior United Press correspondent. The foreign news agencies, Reuters and Agence France Presse, had Pat [John W.] Heffernan and Jean Lagrange respectively, both senior diplomatic reporters. The specials, that is, the daily newspapers, had their best on the beat: Murrey Marder, Chal [Chalmers] Roberts of the *Washington Post*; Ned [E. W.] Kenworthy, Bill Jorden, Max Frankel of the *New York Times*; Pete Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*; John Cauley of the *Kansas City Star*; Paul Ward [of] the *Baltimore Sun*; Tom Lambert [of] the *Los Angeles Times*. The network people in those days--John Scali was with ABC; Elie Abel, NBC; Marvin

Kalb, CBS; and of those, Marvin Kalb is about the only one around still doing it on a daily basis. But I always regarded that crowd, including their foreign counterparts, that group, as about the best you would find in journalism and [believed] that the State Department beat was the best in town. Most of those reporters, as I recall, were given ample space in their publications or time on the air and tried to do as thorough a job on the foreign policy story, which is not always that visible a thing, with a beginning and an end, and treated the thing seriously. Now, of course, we had our times of high drama when things tended to get telescoped and, I would say, bent the story a little bit out of shape. But I thought that was a superior press corps.

G: Any particular egregious examples of bad journalism? You don't have to mention names, but stories perhaps.

M: Well, I don't think of anything immediately. Let me make a general observation. There were, on occasions, the subject that we on the government side would try to introduce and interest the press in, and oftentimes it was met with something of a collective yawn, that "if the government is taking the initiative here, it's going to be with the government's best face on it," and the more cynical of the reporters would sort of lay back on the story. I remember trying to get them at one time interested in what some of our specialists in the State Department saw as a possible shortage of oil in the Middle East. Well, it wasn't a story that had the kind of *coup d'état* immediacy to it. It was something that wasn't going to happen tomorrow morning or didn't happen the night before, yet it proved to be one of the most underrated stories that went begging for attention for quite a long time. And I think some of those fellows, if you were to ask them today, would say that it was a genuinely missed opportunity, because we all know what happened then, in 1973.

One, of course, thinks about the generic story of Vietnam, and there was egregious treatment of certain aspects of that story from time to time. I like to think that during that period, that long night of Vietnam, that the rather hostile, if not rancid, atmosphere that developed at the Pentagon, and to another extent at the White House, didn't permeate as deeply at the State Department. I think we had a much more civil relationship during the period than elsewhere in town where angles of the story were being covered. We had our moments. I once was driven almost to distraction by trying to define the city limits of Hanoi during the American bombing of North Vietnam, because the government had said our planes would not strike the city, and the press had fixed certain thresholds in the story [such] that any indication that that threshold was reached added a whole new dimension to American involvement, which was banner stuff, as we all know, in the country. I had to in fact come down with a map and, over a period of three days, attempt to define the city limits. We engaged in what was really an unworthy argument between two mature groups. But there it was, and it really said something about the way the temperature was developing between the press and the government at that time.

But when one asks about egregious treatments, the subject is Vietnam. From time to time, I was being asked about the body count in Vietnam, and I judged rather early on that there was slippage in the figures that were being used in Saigon and at the Pentagon, and tried to make a virtue out of the State Department not answering questions about body count. I would like to think that that was a wise decision, because I do think that, to the extent there was something called a credibility gap, it was on measurable things like that arithmetic that the press was able to make its case for being misled, and the debate

that went on over what figure was correct was greatly to the disadvantage of the government.

G: So you would say that the credibility gap, as it was called--I think that was Murrey Marder's phrase--did not exist in perhaps quite as strenuous a fashion at State as it did at the Pentagon?

M: I don't believe it did. Of course, I'd have to acknowledge a certain prejudice there, but I think if you talk to some of the correspondents who were there during that period, I believe they'd agree, because I was aware of--I could read the briefing transcripts at the Pentagon and the White House on a daily basis, and I sensed that there was much more heat than light there. I think that over that long period, the Department of State strove to bring light to it. We didn't always succeed, but I had the sense that the press corps at least gave us "E" for effort.

G: To what extent were you required to coordinate statements with the Pentagon spokesman and White House spokesman?

M: We made an effort to do that. I remember quite well--that was when Bill Moyers was White House press secretary, and I guess it was Phil Goulding who was over at Defense at the time and myself at State, and we had a conference call each morning because, by its very nature, the coverage of the war from the Washington end was fair game at the White House, State, and Defense. It seemed to make eminently good sense, if each of us was going to be asked the same question, that we compare notes to be sure that we were using the same basic information and that our responses were consistent, or if there seemed to be a question or if there was a risk of appearing contradictory, to have the subject entirely handled by one of the three. It didn't always work, but when it did, it justified the getting

together over the telephone--about mid-morning, because all the briefings came within half an hour of one another.

But you asked about the credibility gap. Yes, I believe that it's correct that Murrey Marder was the first to use it, but I know others in town who have claimed that they were the first to coin the phrase. And it became, I would like to think, a little more imagined than real when it was related to the Vietnam War. But I remember in an earlier period the working phrase around this town was "news management," and that was related to the Cuban missile crisis. I believed, and still do, that the phrases were really way overdone.

G: Was there ever an occasion when the temperature went up because you were unable to coordinate with the Pentagon or with the White House?

M: Oh, sure. Of course. There were days during the week when the White House might schedule two briefings, and they would try to do one at 10:00 a.m. and the other at 12:00. As I recall, the 10:00 a.m. one was to, in effect, get the President's schedule for the day out, but once the spokesman was there, he was going to be asked questions about other subjects. So it often happened that the same question would come up later at State or Defense, and if the answer was in any shade different, well, there you were, off and running, because immediately you would hear, "Well, at the White House we were told this morning this," and it would be a shade of phrasing, and we were at that point when words and punctuation, indeed, were being calibrated to a fault.

G: It reminds you of the way diplomatic documents are written at the conference tables, almost. Shades of meaning and nuance of phrase.

M: So I shouldn't be calling the press, I guess, any blacker than the government for deliberate attention to phrasing of words, because you are absolutely right. Governments do it, and sometimes a lot rides on it. (Laughter)

I remember quite well a briefing at the State Department that started something like this. "There's a report in the Reuters News Agency this morning based on a monitored radio broadcast from Hanoi that the North Vietnamese foreign minister said, 'If the U.S. would do A and B, there could be negotiations.'" Now, remember that this is a period long before we reached any negotiations in Paris, so it was indeed a newsworthy issue if the foreign minister of North Vietnam had said what the questioner who raised the subject said he said. The first response I made was that I wasn't aware of a broadcast or a statement by the North Vietnamese foreign minister. That had the absolute virtue of being true. I simply had not heard of it. Then, believe it or not, someone else in the press corps said, "Wait a moment. I thought that the foreign minister was quoted as saying, "If the United States did A and B, there *would* be negotiations." Well, for the next three days, because the government couldn't lay hands on what the North Vietnamese foreign minister had actually said, it was a story as to whether the North Vietnamese used the word "could" or "would," and indeed, we went so far as to compare the use of the two words in English to the relative phrases in French. We were at that arcane a point.

G: I had heard something similar but not quite--I didn't know that they had gone to those lengths. Did you ever decide what the man did, in fact, say?

M: He, as I remember, used the word "could." I, many years later, wrote about this in a column in the *Washington Post*.

G: We can find it. Can we talk a bit about the two well-publicized incidents?

M: Oh, sure.

G: The first, I think, was the news that the marines in 1965 had been given a new mission.

M: Well, the day that I made that acknowledgment in a press briefing was at least several weeks after the marines in fact had been given this mission. And recall that the Vietnam story was being written from both ends, around the clock. When we were going to bed in this part of the world, people were getting up out there, and the shooting was just beginning again for the day, and the press corps went to work, so you were on something of a twenty-four hour cycle with just saturation coverage. Well, it was only a matter of days before stories coming out of South Vietnam were saying, if not on their own [then] with attribution to unnamed sources, that the marines were indeed in another and expanded role here, which was to say they were in combat. They were authorized to be. I think that for at least a week the same question was being put to me at the State Department, and it was being addressed with a slightly different cast each time. It was perfectly clear to me that what was being sought was some acknowledgment that this was a fact. And on that day in June of 1965, the question came at me in a way that I was either going to have to mislead them or acknowledge, and I chose to acknowledge.

G: How long had you known that the mission had been changed?

M: About a week.

G: But this was embargoed information?

M: Yes. And there was a certain hell to pay here in Washington when it happened, because the President believed, perhaps, that it could be denied and had George Reedy issue a long statement the following day that attempted to discredit what I had said. And the

White House statement was published, stories were written about it, but I don't think anyone covering Washington accepted it for the truth.

G: Did you find it necessary very often to withhold information like that?

M: You're always going to find it necessary to withhold information, and there is nothing in our system that says that there's anything wrong with withholding information. In my experience, nine times out of ten when you were in that situation it had to do with the timing of its use, and I think the government is entitled to have some control over the timing of use of its information. Now if it's being capriciously withheld and there's no real justification for doing so, then I think that the government is going to pay an unnecessary price, because, whether we like it or not, and particularly since the war in Vietnam, the news media in this country is just that much more involved than it ever was before, and the skill with which the news media collectively goes at information that it has decided is of public interest--eight times out of ten they'll turn it out. I know that if the *Washington Post* decides, or has reason to believe, [that] there is a story on whatever subject, it will simply turn loose ten reporters in this town, and the notion inside government that one office may be the repository for the information [and] can, simply by saying nothing, withhold it, oftentimes won't hold for more than a day or two.

Information is spread all over this town. I used to say that foreign policy may not be made all over town, but it sure as hell is talked about all over town, and all one reporter needs is to get a snippet. He doesn't have to have the full story, and rarely does, from one person, and he may be talking to some unknown staff member on the Hill who will have seen something in an executive branch document, and the press is off and running.

G: Did you get into hot water over this?

M: Yes. I don't know what President Johnson felt, because I never spoke directly with him about it. I know that he did express himself to Dean Rusk, who was then secretary of state, and in his characteristically elegant way, Rusk said something like, "It would have been better if you had found some way to muffle the answer there." But I believe that within a few days the administration collectively agreed that if it didn't happen on that day, it was going to happen another couple of days later, and it was inevitable, and it was better to have it out in the open than to have it festering somewhere.

G: How difficult had it been for you to get the correct information about the change?

M: Well, I mean, anyone serving as a government spokesman takes as much by osmosis. Listen and read. If you are doing your job, you are, in effect, covering your building in the way that a reporter is. At State, simply because I was at it so long, I attended the most important meetings and was on distribution for the most highly classified traffic, but that doesn't say that everything that you feel you ought to know about is handed to you. There are some things you just have to learn by osmosis, and I can't recall at all how I first knew about this. My hunch is it was something I just absorbed. I don't remember ever having seen a paper, the national security memorandum dated such-and-such that "marines are now authorized to do this and that." That piece of paper may exist somewhere, but it was not what put me in the position of knowing.

G: You say President Johnson never talked to you about this incident?

M: He didn't.

G: What about the "thought, word, and deed" message on Israel?

M: To quote somebody I just met, it was "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault" that I said, "The United States is neutral in thought, word, and deed" on the morning that the war in the Middle East broke out in 1967. I have oftentimes been asked what I would like to see on my tombstone, and I can tell you very quickly. It is "I wish I hadn't said that." Because it was to introduce a little bit of poetry that was simply not tolerable under the circumstances.

The background of it is that several of us came into the Department of State very early that morning when first word that shooting had broken out reached Washington--and recall that the events leading up to the outbreak of shooting were of high tension. For weeks prior to that, the U.S. was very much involved in a diplomatic effort to avoid the very thing that happened on June 6. And in those circumstances of that previous week or two, our line was that "we are attempting to mediate, to be an honest broker between the parties in the Middle East." The word "evenhanded" was the buzzword that we kept using. "We want to be evenhanded in this."

Well, by the time I got to the press briefing on that day, I had put together a kind of bill of particulars that began with where U.S. embassies, consulates, and libraries had been damaged as a result of the fighting; it was perfectly clear that the United States was going to take some of the blame. That damage was occurring in the Arab countries. Well, I started off with that, just so the reporters wouldn't have to ask a lot of questions, and it was information that I simply volunteered. Then we got to the questions, and it was Bernie [Bernard] Gwertzman of the *New York Times* who put a question--something like "You have been telling us now for days, if not weeks, that the U.S. has been evenhanded, or trying to be evenhanded in this, in hope of a resolution before war.

Where are you now?" I am not quoting precisely, but that was the sense of the question. And unfortunately I said, "We are neutral in thought, word, and deed."

Now that phrase, sentence, was actually uttered early that morning by Eugene Rostow, who was undersecretary of state for political affairs and one of several of us who were summoned to the Operations Center as information was coming in from the Middle East. And there is no question that, as a description of the U.S. diplomatic position at the moment, that it was accurate. But accurate doesn't mean, as I learned, that you can be as free with words as that bit of fancy took me. So that led to a hell of a lot of trouble, and Lyndon Johnson first felt the impact of it later that day. Oddly enough, as I remember looking at the wire service stories from the briefing, they were not bulletin leads; they were rather short stories. I remember the AP began and used the phrase in its lead. I think the UPI story led with my recounting of damage to American buildings, mainly, not a ho-hum thing, no sirens going off. But before the afternoon was out, prominent members of the Jewish community in the United States began to call the White House, and by six o'clock that night the story had taken on a life of its own that, I guess, in my experience has never been equalled, fortunately.

G: From this distance, it's a little difficult to see why people got so excited. What's the--?

M: Well, the word "neutral" has, in any relationship to a shooting war, a pejorative dimension that otherwise the word doesn't have, and it is the more pejorative given the special nature of this country's relationship with Israel. And it wasn't the political reality, but it was made [such] that afternoon. It was interpreted by prominent Jews in this country as the United States standing away at a distance from Israel. It's most unfortunate, but it's just a fact of life that this relationship is loaded with a lot more than--

I'm sorry--that words take on a meaning when you talk about this relationship that otherwise they may not have.

G: I had never heard that that phrase was uttered by Eugene Rostow first.

M: Yes.

G: So that the assumption that it comes directly to you from the *Baltimore Catechism* is not correct.

M: (Laughter) No. Let's see if I can recall. This was after several hours where men had gotten up in the middle of the night and into the Operations Center trying to amass information coming from several different quarters in the Middle East, some of it contradicting previous information of thirty minutes before, finally feeling that at about 7:00 a.m., I guess it was, that we had a pretty good fix on where the shooting began and what was likely to carry on throughout the rest of the day. As you know, [the war] went on for a week, and just simply getting up from the table then the question was, "Well, we know where we are. We know what we're trying to do. We've been trying to steer through the middle of this," and as almost a parting remark, Rostow uttered this. It stuck in the back of my mind for reasons I shall never be able to explain, and I just wish it would go away. (Laughter) But now you know as much as I do about it.

G: At the risk of seeming frivolous, and I don't mean to, couldn't you have quieted critics in the Jewish community by simply saying, "Look, I got this from Eugene Rostow"?

M: That, it seemed to me, would have been quite unfair to do--(Laughter)--and I had to take full responsibility for it.

G: As long as we're on the Six Day War, could you take us through the exercise of the *Liberty* incident as you saw it from the perspective of press relations?

M: Well, looked at in that perspective, it was, at first blush, and I guess for the first twenty-four hours, seen publicly here as an Israeli attack against an unarmed U.S. Navy vessel. As the next couple of days passed, the information available to me made a case that it was an accident. Now, I realize that in the years ever since there is still a debate about how accidental the whole strike was. I, for my part, never felt that I had as much information--whether it was available may be a question, but I never felt that I had enough information to satisfy me that it was genuinely an accident. That very thought simply astonishes me, that an Israeli plane or planes would carry out a strike on an American naval vessel. I can believe it's an accident. After all, we ourselves bombed Soviet vessels in the harbor at Haiphong. Now, no rational person would expect that the United States, given the way we were trying to restrain possible Soviet reaction in Vietnam, would pick out a Soviet vessel as a target. So I don't want to believe that the Israelis would pick out an American communications vessel hardly offshore and carry out a strike. But I still am not convinced that it was an accident.

G: Well, that's a pretty strong statement coming from a man who is supposed to speak for the State Department.

M: Well--

G: At least, that's how I interpret it, as a strong statement. How long was it before we knew enough of the bare facts of the case to make a coherent statement about it?

M: I frankly don't remember, but if I said forty-eight hours, I don't think I would be off by very much. At least so far as the State Department and I personally were concerned, we would not have known on a given day that the vessel was there, so that we were starting at the State Department from scratch when news that the ship had been struck first came.

And my hunch is that we would have been maybe up to forty-eight hours trying to get enough in hand to respond to questions. But I've always been uncomfortable about that one.

G: How did you get ready for a press briefing on, say, a typical day? Maybe there weren't any typical days.

M: Well, there were many typical days, and they typically began by looking at what had already been reported. So that you used the morning papers available to you, the early morning news broadcast, and constructed from that a budget, and then went around the department to the relevant bureaus seeking information in part whether what you saw published was correct, if you didn't know yourself about it by other means. You could, with a fair degree of reliability, pick the subjects that were going to come up for questioning. You could never be sure how the line of questioning would develop, but if there was a story that morning that there was diversion of U.S. aid equipment in Pakistan, then almost surely you would be asked about that, because these stories that I am talking about would have been exclusively in the *New York Times* in one case or exclusively in the *Washington Post* in another or on NBC.

Now the thing you couldn't predict was the subject that a reporter, who had been keeping, maybe, a little futures book for himself, was going to raise in the open press briefing. Another unknown was--another thing to keep in mind was that reporters were pursuing stories that they may not raise in the press briefing, because to raise the subject was to give it away, and they wanted to go after it exclusively. So you generally went through two phases of this briefing. You answered questions in front of the group, and then, when the formal briefing broke up, you'd be pursued down the hall by individuals

who wanted you to help them if you could with information about a pet subject they were pursuing, or where would you advise that they go for information.

But there was always something that you simply couldn't be prepared for. I remember the day in 1964--maybe it was 1966 [1967]--when out of nowhere I got a question in the briefing as to whether Stalin's daughter had asked for asylum at the American Embassy in New Delhi. Now, I will admit to you frankly I did not even know that Stalin had a daughter. Well, as you know, that turned out to be quite a story, and it was something that a reporter heard on somebody's broadcast five minutes before coming into the State Department briefing. And it subsequently turned out that, yes indeed, the Department had had a telegram sometime overnight that she had appeared at the American Embassy and requested asylum. But it's not something I would have known to be looking for in mid-morning in preparation for the press briefing. So that kind of thing, that possibility was always there, of course.

G: How did you respond to a question like that?

M: Well, I surely didn't say anything smart-assed. (Laughter) I'm glad about that; I'm glad that I didn't because it turned out to be a very serious story. But I'm telling you frankly I was not aware that Stalin had a daughter, and even if I knew that, I would have thought it was pretty far-out that she would have appeared at the American Embassy in India, requesting political asylum.

G: Was Don Oberdorfer covering the State Department in those days?

M: No. Don may have been in Japan in those years. He was there for quite a long time for the *Post*. No, it was Murrey Marder and Chal Roberts in those days. Later, Marilyn Berger joined.

G: Was it difficult to get the information you needed to brief--?

M: Sometimes it was very difficult. When I first took over the news office--and I'm going to exaggerate to make a point--there was an attitude in the Foreign Service: "Tell them as little as possible. They don't understand that this is a very complex game we're in, and unless you're a Foreign Service officer, you don't really appreciate it, and these guys in the press corps treat this story, a foreign-policy, foreign-affairs story, or want to treat it, like an athletic contest." I like to think that I ground away over a period of time long enough at Foreign Service officers so that reporters were able to go to the desk officers and office directors to fill out that part of the story that the briefing officer couldn't possibly have at hand, and that, over time, the State Department became institutionally more responsive to the press. But there was an attitude that "you don't tell them very much." My predecessor, who had been the press spokesman almost as long as I later became, had a very tough time with this and had difficulty getting information, attending meetings, and never traveling with the secretary of state. By the time I got to the job, that became easier to do. It turned on the confidence that the secretary of state would place in you, and when that became visible elsewhere around the department, then other people would be more responsive. But you often had to fight to get--fight is not a fair word--you often had to be persistent to get information.

G: So the key was your relationship with Secretary Rusk.

M: It was very much the case.

G: How did that develop?

M: Out of traveling with him. I remember I first went to Cherokee County with him. He was born in Cherokee County, Georgia. We were in Georgia for two days, I believe. Among

other things, he either received an honorary degree or simply made a speech at Emory University. We went back to Davidson College, where he had gone to school as an undergraduate. He and I walked around the neighborhood in Atlanta where he lived, and the house was no longer there because part of a highway had been constructed in the neighborhood. I went to different campuses with him in the early sixties before I became the press spokesman. It grew, and I think there was--I know now and have known for some years--a mutual respect, and I happen to have a lot of affection for the man. Then, that carried over into other secretaries of state I worked with. But I owe it all to Dean Rusk.

G: Did you ever unwittingly deceive the press due to--?

M: Oh, the one very bad experience I had involved Singapore, and here I did end up unwittingly lying to the press. We had a telegram in Washington of an afternoon that the prime minister in Singapore had met with some American journalists that day and, among other things, told them a story about how one or two CIA station officials had tried to bribe a Singaporean government official or two officials. In any case, that was the story, the CIA and the Singapore government. I saw the telegram that afternoon. The telegram indicated that American news organizations were there for the briefing, and I sent word to what was then called the Far East Bureau in the department that afternoon that "if any of these newspapers carried a story about this tomorrow, it obviously will be a question for us at the press briefing, and I need information and guidance." So sure enough, the *New York Times* had it in a story the next day, and I received a paper from the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs that assured me in writing that nothing such had happened; it could be

denied, and the paper was signed by several people, including the man who was then the acting assistant secretary for the bureau, a career officer.

Now I should say that this incident, at that time, was about five years old. Just before going to the briefing, I saw a story on one of the news agency wires from Kuala Lumpur quoting our ambassador there as saying, "Nothing like that ever happened." The significance of this is that five years earlier he was director of the office in the department that included Singapore, so that sort of added to my confidence in what I'd been provided.

Sure enough, the question was one of the first out of the bag, and I sailed into it with a denial. Well, the story went on the wires that afternoon, and I'm trying to remember whether it was late that day or the next morning, but Dean Rusk called me in to show me a letter that John Kennedy wrote to Lee Kuan Yew apologizing for the incident. Well, needless to say, I got a lot of religion out of that, and that day, the following day, went into the press briefing and apologized to the newsmen that I had misled them--I had technically lied to them--that I acted on the basis of information that was given to me by people I trusted would know, and in the meantime, I had gone back to these people, and they professed to me that there was nothing in their files that showed anything like that ever happened. Well, the religion I got out of it was that Dick Helms and I became pretty good friends. Dick, at that time, was the number two at CIA. And we had an understanding that any time it was decided that Washington, the USG, would respond to a question like that about an alleged CIA activity, we would be in contact to be sure that we all had the facts and the last possible word on it, and that I would see Dean Rusk every day before going to the briefing. So, yes, I misled the press on that one and felt humiliated.

G: You'll forgive me if I observe that the press seems to have given you uniformly high marks for your performance as spokesman at State. Now, without wanting to put you on the spot, would you tell me why you think that's so?

M: I would put it this way, that they, over a period of time, were convinced that I would not mislead them or give them information that I knew--that I *knew*--to be misleading or inaccurate; that I was working as hard on their behalf inside the institution as I was on the side of the institution; and that I had a pretty fair sense of humor. (Laughter)

G: Is that an essential quality?

M: I think it is absolutely essential.

G: Are press relations during the Johnson years going to be known as the era of the credibility gap?

M: Forever?

G: And if so, is that justified?

M: It isn't justified at all. It was a tough period, and the President himself contributed to some of this, I am sorry to say, over some rather trivial matters. I mean, it was at least worthy of debate, discussion, argument, with the war in Vietnam being the issue, but it was really trivial when the press couldn't learn from the White House what time the President would leave to go to Oklahoma or wherever. There was an obsession inside there with wanting to hold everything until the last possible moment. Most reporters grew very cynical at the White House when they would take a walk around the garden with LBJ, and he would read them telegrams reporting progress in Vietnam. Obviously, it's understandable--he wanted to accentuate the positive--but it had to do to an important extent with his personality, and reporters there knew his personality better than I did.

They didn't work for him [and] I did, but they knew him better than I did. And it just drives that institution, the press corps, you know, up the wall, and mistrust builds. When it came to the business of traveling, they had to pack their bags the same as the President had to pack his. So all of that was unnecessary, but it fits into the gap issue, and that means that the gap gets inflated on non-substantive grounds.

I'm afraid that without justification, without complete justification, the [Johnson] Administration will be forever associated with the credibility gap, the phrase "credibility gap," owing to its public handling of daily news concerning the war. And I think that the Nixon Administration, with all of its flaws and faults, indecencies, Nixon's known attitude toward the press, at least from my point of view, was not as bad as it was with LBJ. Johnson put Bill Moyers in as press secretary, and then was known to resent him if he appeared telling more than on that day the President felt he ought to be. But Moyers has talked about this himself.

G: Along this line, if there was a credibility gap, the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* shouldn't have been [inaudible], it seems, between what the government was saying and what it was actually doing, and there was indeed an outcry when the *Pentagon Papers* were published. As one who's looked through the papers, do you find great surprises contained therein?

M: Not at all. There wasn't very much, and certainly not an impressive amount, of new disclosure there that had not already been written about, or known. The inherent value of the *Pentagon Papers*, and [their value] as applied as an indictment of government, was way overdone. The debate was really about whether the press--and it should have been

confined to that--about the press' right to publication. But I never felt there was all that much in the *Pentagon Papers*, and there are journalists who say the same thing.

G: As the man who spoke for the government and who was a practicing journalist, how did you feel on the issue of publication?

M: I felt that it was stolen property, and I may take a *Baltimore Catechism* view about this, but I just believe that there is such a thing as ownership, and if you take something that belongs to somebody else without his agreement, it is by definition stealing. But we're in a period, my friend, when those values have been, I would like to say, undermined so that they sometimes become meaningless.

G: [Inaudible] Now, in 1969, you became special assistant to the secretary. Is that correct?

M: Oh, yes.

G: What did you do [inaudible]?

M: Well, what I did was--when William Rogers became secretary of state, the question was did I want to become assistant secretary of state for public affairs. The Office of News is one component of the Bureau of Public Affairs, so it ends up being the tail wagging the dog, because it is the one that gets into the mainstream of the department's activity. And I said no. I didn't want to be responsible for who was going to be making speeches here and there, and the publications that the department publishes, including the Office of History. Just the news job alone was plenty demanding. And I asked Rogers to agree to put the news function in the Office of the Secretary and take it out of the Bureau of Public Affairs. I didn't care what I was called. So I didn't, on a day-to-day basis, do anything different than when I had been deputy assistant secretary of state in the new situation. It

was just a different title [McCloskey became assistant secretary of state for congressional relations].

It stayed that way all the way through the Nixon and Ford Administrations, [until] Hodding Carter came in and argued to put it back in the Bureau of Public Affairs. See, the assistant secretary for public affairs is a presidential appointment, and if you want a presidential appointment, you don't have it as simply the press spokesman or special assistant to the secretary. Again, that didn't bother me. But if you wanted that, you had to be assistant secretary for public affairs, and anybody worth his salt, to put it candidly, wouldn't want to be assistant secretary of state for public affairs without also having the Office of News there.

G: You have had, if I may say so, an unusual career pattern now, and yet I think I know another gentleman whose career is very much parallel. That's Bill Jorden. Did you have a lot of association with him?

M: Well, a fair amount, you see. I mentioned him earlier in our discussion here as one of the *New York Times* reporters. That's when I first knew him. He had been brought back from Moscow to Washington, and he and Frankel, Max Frankel, at the time were the *New York Times* correspondents covering the State Department. I don't remember the circumstances of Bill's leaving the *New York Times*. What I remember next is he was appointed press officer to the U.S. delegation to the Paris talks on Vietnam. He was for a time in the State Department as a part of Averell Harriman's office--I guess that's what it was--and it was later that he went over to the White House on the NSC [National Security Council] staff.

G: Right.

Have you got any observations about the special problems or unique approaches to the jobs of some of your colleagues? I have got a list of names here. Barry Zorthian, for example, who was, of course, in Saigon for a long time. Arthur Sylvester, Phil Goulding, Richard Fryklund, Dan Henkin, and General [Winant] Sidle.

M: The only one who stands out and reminds me of something particular is Art Sylvester, who, I think, had the bad judgment to say publicly in Washington one time that the government has the right to lie. Now, if you try to say something like that and leave it just at that, you really are asking for trouble, because it will be given the most narrow interpretation, and I don't know Jody Powell, but he has said something similar to this recently. First of all, I really don't accept the statement "The government has the right to lie." The government has the right to withhold information. The government has the right to say, "No comment." The government has the right to say, "I won't answer that question," and I did that many times. But I think Art Sylvester committed an important blunder with that, and I think it haunted him until the--I don't know whether he stayed all the way through the Kennedy administration or not; I think he didn't. But in any case, that sort of became his trademark in town, and to my knowledge, he used to defend it, defend saying it. Now, of course, someone will always throw up that there could and will arise that situation in war or some other crisis [such] that the government has the right to lie. I just think that there are ways to not answer the question. And the situation may not always arise in the form of a question, but I just don't think it's sensible.

About the others you mentioned, I knew them all except Sidle. I know his name, but I don't remember him.

G: Perhaps I should include John Mecklin.

M: John I knew well, and I had known him as a correspondent for *Time*. John, I think, himself became disillusioned with the U.S. role in Vietnam. He was a very serious and introspective fellow who, I think, probably was not cut out for the rough-and-tumble of that job, as it turned out.

G: I have a point in passing down here. Our records show that you got a phone call from Lyndon Johnson at one time. Do you remember what that was about?

M: Yes, he was giving me hell about a--the subject was *Hello, Dolly!* No, the subject was actually a broader one. It was the renewal of the U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange agreement. It was a story, and had been a story, for the better part of two weeks, that we had been in the negotiations for several months. As it got down to the last of the negotiation, every other day there were questions, "Are you going to complete this negotiation? How are things going?" So each day, they'd sort of just keep book on you. Well, the day that the thing was to be signed--and it was to be done here in Washington--a signing ceremony [was] scheduled for the Department of State, and the whole press corps knew this. It happened that there was something in the English text that, translated into Russian, did not mean the same thing. It was just some insignificant last-minute kind of thing. So the signing didn't occur at eleven o'clock, or whenever it was scheduled for at the State Department, and, you see, it was to be followed by a lunch at the Soviet Embassy, and Rusk was going to the luncheon. So I asked a fellow named Art Worzel--

G: Would you spell that name, please?

M: W-O-R-Z-E-L. Art was on the staff of--what was it called?--East-West Exchanges, I think, the responsible staff for the negotiations. I said, "Now, when they get this cleared up over there at the lunch, would you be good enough to call me, and I'll hold up the

briefing, because I'm going to have to say we have it or we don't have it." It was at that point. So sure enough, Art called me at twelve-thirty, whenever it was, and said, "The deed is done, and everything is cleared up." I'd have to look at the transcript [to see] whether I walked into the briefing room and said, "Well, it's completed," or whether I waited until I was asked, and the answer was, "Yes, it's completed." So the stories were "U.S., Soviets today reached a new cultural exchange agreement for the next couple of years."

Now somewhere that afternoon, LBJ learned that the *Hello, Dolly!* company, which had gone to Europe and was scheduled to go into the Soviet Union as the last attraction under the previous agreement, had run into some difficulty with the Soviets. I don't remember what it was, but at least the *Hello, Dolly!* company was not going to arrive in Moscow on the day they had been scheduled. Whereupon Lyndon Johnson evidently said, "In that case, we have no new agreement," and then somebody said to him, "But the State Department just"--I have to make a little of this up to get to the point--"but the State Department today said, 'We have a new agreement.'" Well, I had just gotten home at six-thirty when Bill Moyers called me and said, "You had better lean against the wall and hold on, because the President wants you." So for the next twenty minutes I listened and tried twice to say something. Hardly got a word in. The message was that "There is no new agreement reached unless the President of the United States approves it, and I did not approve it!" And he kept trying to get me to say who it was that told me that everything had been completed, and what I was trying to say was that the Secretary of State was at the luncheon, and word was sent to me from the luncheon. I was trying not to use Worzel's name. I didn't think that that was all that relevant, because Dean Rusk

would have to take the responsibility for it. Well, LBJ just read me up one side and down the other. I guess he knew that I had caused him grief in the past, and here I was causing him grief again. That went through my head also, and he certainly had the right to say [that] if we didn't have an agreement, we didn't have an agreement. So I heard him out and said--"Thank you very much," I think I said at the end. If I didn't say "very much," I said, "Thank you, Mr. President."

So that cooled down by the next day, and we went ahead with the agreement and had the signing. (Laughter) So everybody got what he wanted, I guess.

G: That's a good story. Have you read the account in *The Best and the Brightest* of how LBJ is supposed to have reacted to your--?

M: Yes. [David] Halberstam had called me as he was writing the book, and as I remember--I looked at it once--the account in outline is all right.

G: Did you get any feedback from your colleagues in journalism about LBJ pressuring editors or individual reporters on certain stories?

M: You know, I'm tempted to say yes, but then I wouldn't be able to add, so at the risk of not wanting to be unfair, I better--

G: You know, there was the famous Morley Safer story, the burning of the village of Cam Ne.

M: Sorry. I don't remember that.

G: Zippo lighters?

M: Oh well, I remember the story of using Zippo lighters, but I guess what I don't know is where LBJ came into it. He went to CBS?

[Interruption]

M: I don't remember anything specific in this regard involving LBJ, but I leave room for the possibility that he personally would have intervened with executives of news organizations. I do remember John Kennedy going to the *New York Times* in two cases. One, he was troubled by David Halberstam's coverage early on from Vietnam and proposed, if that's not too soft a word, to the *New York Times* that Halberstam be moved out. And earlier, with the Bay of Pigs story, it was known that the *Times* was preparing a story, or several, based on information they had that people were being trained in the southern United States and that this had to do with some possible intervention in Cuba, and the *Times* delayed publication. Kennedy himself later admitted that he wished that he hadn't done that, on the grounds--because it turned out to be a disaster--that if there had been some public reaction to oppose such an adventure, he might not have gone through with it. But yes, I'm afraid that too often there is a notion at the high levels of government that you can talk the press out of carrying reports, that your concern is not that they're inaccurate, but that they could be embarrassing, awkward at that time, and I think there is less of a reception to that today than there may have been in the past.

There was a time when the American press was closer to the government. You could go back and look at some stories about how the American press quite willingly promoted Marshall Plan stories, that kind of thing. You just wouldn't get the press today to do that kind of thing. The sense of an adversary relationship is just that much stronger, and that comes out of a complex background that is pretty familiar, I think, to most people today. But I guess one of my despairs always was that the people who come into the top levels of government, from presidents through their cabinet secretaries, have an oversimplified notion of the way the news process works. When there is a story that is

embarrassing or discomfiting, the reaction at the top level too often is, "There must be some treasonous guy down in the bowels who called a reporter in and told him all of this." Well, you shouldn't have to be in Washington very long to realize that that's not the way things happen and that not all reporters have their brains in their feet. These are people, many of them with long institutional memories, who are here before politicians come and long after many of them go, and who are just smart about the subjects they cover.

G: Did you get involved very deeply in the controversial 206,000-man troop request that Westmoreland made, or is supposed to have made, or which was being discussed? Or was that primarily a Pentagon story?

M: It was essentially Pentagon and White House. I don't think you would find much in the record that we addressed on that subject, and it may even be that the State Department only had fragmentary information about it.

G: That came to my mind because the story of how that was put together reminds me very much of what you just talked about in the way reporters put stories together.

G: Oh, yes. You know, there was a time I remember--I often use this as an example to simply say that the reporters have a lot more smarts than they are often given credit for. Before nuclear weapons, nuclear strategy, nuclear arms negotiations became such a big story, there was a coterie, a handful of journalists in this town, who just knew that subject, knew the arithmetic, knew how nuclear reactors produce the juice, and there weren't more than a handful in town who paid attention to this issue. It just was a story that never made front page news. But either by avocation, or vocation, or combination, [they] just knew the subject. Now these guys, I well remember, could come into your

office and construct a story about what was likely to happen next simply because of their own solid understanding of the subject matter, and with a shrug of the shoulders, [they] would know that they were on the money or not.

I want to tell you finally my favorite story about who said what to whom, and the search for who it was who said what to whom. It involves Pete Lisagor, the late, great Pete Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*, and Homer Bigart, who most recently was of the *New York Times*, now retired, but in those days was with the *New York Herald Tribune*. They had adjoining offices in the National Press Club building. Homer was in Pete's office one day when there on the front page of the *Chicago Daily News* was a Lisagor story about Korea, and it was on the subject of American prisoners. This gives you some idea of about how far back I'm going. Bigart allowed that that was a--"Looks like a very good story, Pete. Do you think it would stand up today?" And Pete said, "Well, I'm not so sure, but I will call my source at the State Department." So Pete dialed the fellow at the State Department, and while he did, Homer Bigart picked up the extension phone. Lisagor said to his source at the State Department, "By the way, I wrote a story about that subject we were talking of the other day, and I just want to ask whether anything has changed since then." And the fellow said, "No, nothing has changed." And Pete said, "Thank you very much," and hung up, and Bigart hung up the extension. The following day Bigart wrote the story for the *New York Herald Tribune*. The *Chicago Daily News* was not really read in Washington, but the *New York Herald Tribune* was, so when the story appeared, Eisenhower demanded to know who had talked to Homer Bigart at the *Herald Tribune*, and set out a search. Well, as you see, no one talked to Homer Bigart.

(Laughter)

G: Knowingly, anyway. What do you think of--I guess it's old enough to be called a saw--"The government leaks from the top"?

M: Well, there is something to it, of course, and I think that what saying that does is raise one of the more complex and interesting questions about the relationship between government and press, or journalists and government officials. Because the government is covered to such an extent by the press in Washington day in and day out, there are relationships which develop between reporters and sources, at least on a wider scale in Washington than in anyplace else in the world. I know of specific cases where these professional relationships have grown into personal relationships that involve having dinner at one another's homes, families getting to know one another, kids in the same schools, some going on vacations with one another, and you're getting into a very delicate balance between the official and the reporter which oftentimes makes it difficult for some of them to continue seeing one another. I know this to be so. Ben Bradlee was a next-door neighbor of John Kennedy when Kennedy was a senator. Kennedy became president; he moved several blocks away, but Bradlee still enjoyed the relationship with him, and Ben was then the--I don't even know that he was bureau chief, but he was a correspondent here for *Newsweek* magazine and, I'm sure, by his own admission would say that he enjoyed an access to news that easily makes the case for that old saw that "the government leaks from the top." Well, of course it leaks from the top.

I lost an argument with Henry Kissinger when he became secretary of state. I was serving abroad at the time as an ambassador, and he got me back [and] wanted me to take up again the job of press spokesman, and I said no, I didn't want to do that. And we agreed on some other formula, but I remember saying to him that I hoped when he came

to the State Department as secretary that he would look upon his press relations there as really an institutional matter, and that he shouldn't see columnists and other particular correspondents whom he had got to know while he was national security adviser [once he was] at the State Department. And I thought that was very sound advice, and so do many others to whom I've told this. He didn't, and he went on doing the things he had done before, which I think later proved to his disadvantage.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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