INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWEE: FRANK McCULLOCH

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: I wanted you to begin with some general discussion about the journalists there and their involvement in their trade and in the [Vietnam] War itself. Do you think the reporters became emotionally involved in the conflict?

M: Yes. Certainly a significant number of them did, probably including myself. I don't think it was possible not to. I'm not sure I understand the reasons for that, why that was different. In other words, one thing I think that had something to do with it, although I'm not sure I can explain what it had to do with it, is that there was not an our side/that side situation in Vietnam. I think reporters approached it a good deal more journalistically in that there were two sides fighting and they were going to try to cover it. For reasons I don't understand, that led to more emotional involvement, or at least as much emotional involvement, as former war correspondents who looked at a war as our good guys versus those bad guys.

But beyond that, and maybe more importantly, I think what led to the emotional involvement was whatever that weird quality of Vietnam itself is that so affects people. Vietnam is a piece of geography; Vietnam is a culture, Vietnam is topography. All of those things had a powerful effect on a lot of journalists, especially those who stayed quite a while. When that happened, I think the emotional involvement was inescapable. Did it happen to everybody? No, by no means everybody. It didn't tend to happen to people who came and went fairly fast. It didn't--and I think a few journalists were sufficiently self-disciplined that they at least minimized the--

Now, I think I should draw a distinction there, that while an awful lot of journalists I think were emotionally involved, I think a bare minimum of them, and I wouldn't know how to express it, let that intrude on their practice of journalism. I don't think that was an important factor at all in what and how they reported.

G: Do you think that in general terms the reporters tended to reflect the perspectives of the publications they wrote for?

M: No. No, I don't really think so. I think, again, a majority--and I could cite you examples of that.

G: Why don't you do that.

M: I think *U.S. News & World Report* reporters tended to report within the magazine's political-philosophical framework. I can't remember any newspaper reporters that did. In the case of *Time* and *Life* reporters, generally speaking they were at absolute loggerheads with their publications. And in the other circumstances where a reporter's view and reported view of the world coincided with his publication's, I think it was coincidental. Keyes Beech's view of the war, I think in the early years at least, coincided with that of the *Chicago Daily News*. I think that was coincidental. So with that one possible exception--and I don't think that's a significant one--no, I don't think that was generally true.

G: Let's talk a little bit about the relationship of the journalist to the American forces there and the embassy, and MACV as well. You must have had to depend on the American presence for certain things, information, logistics, transportation, and things like that. Let me ask you to describe what sort of dependence there was.

M: Okay. One of the basic ones was simply transportation. By the time the war was three or four years old in terms of American presence, there wasn't any means of transportation except helicopters. Most of the roads were closed or too dangerous to go on or too

time-consuming to go on, so a helicopter was it. And in that you were utterly dependent on MACV or USAID or somebody else who had a helicopter. So that was there.

G: How did you arrange transportation?

M: You were entitled to it as long as you had a MACV press card.

G: Is that right?

M: And then what you did, you took your chances. You arrived at a given point with a MACV press card and went to, in effect, the booking desk and said, "How can I get out of here?" When you're out in the field with a unit, if there was an airlift in or out, a helicopter coming in or out, there was either space or you begged your way onto it, in or out. A press card didn't have much to do with it except to identify you. If you were at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon, you literally went out there, presented [your press card] that identified you and then you got on a manifest for the next ride to Pleiku or wherever it might be.

Now, that was number one. Number two: To some degree, to a significant degree, you're dependent on Americans, either in the military or otherwise, for information, because obviously you didn't have any access, or limited access if any, to the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese. But let me say that in the case of most American journalists--and I'm going to hold it to that because I'm not too familiar with how Germans and French and others functioned--that was always subject to your own subsequent examination in the field. It may or may not have proved to be so when you got out and took a look. So it would not be correct at all to create the impression that most American journalists were spoon-fed information by the American mission. That was a starting point, but most of the time and in the vast majority of circumstances it was a starting point.

G: Generally if you wanted to go somewhere to do some reporting, how would you decide to go? Would a briefing officer say, "We have these points if any of you want to go," or would you simply be told that something was happening in a certain location?

M: Most of the time you knew enough. By that I mean you didn't need a briefing officer to tell you that there was a big battle at Dak To this week. You didn't need a briefing officer to say that the Rockpile was far worse this week than it was when we left last week, or that Khe Sanh was about to become decisive. And usually your decision--and particularly this was more true of weekly journalism, news magazines, than it would have been of the dailies--but your decision was reached generally within some other context. Khe Sanh is reaching the critical stage, and in a broader context it's now possible--maybe you developed this kind of thesis--that the entire northeast corner of the country could go. That's how you'd reach your decision. This is not to say that occasionally you didn't get an idea from briefings, but most of the journalists I know, except those who were tied to it by daily requirements, like the wire services and some of the big newspapers, didn't even go to the briefings, didn't make any use of them at all, just simply didn't attend them. It's like being here. I've been in this plant two weeks; I am now beginning to sense what's happening all around the plant most of the time. It isn't that we have meetings and some people say here's what's happening in the plant. It's an osmosis more than it is a structure.

G: What were your sources generally, your best sources?

M: Field officers, and by field officers I'm not talking only about military, I'm talking about the field officers or field personnel for military, State Department, CIA, and even civilian companies.

G: Did MACV play favorites with regard to who they would let go along on certain missions? For example, if [David] Halberstam had been writing a critical--?

M: You bet, and I was one of them.

G: Really?

M: Yes.

G: You were a favorite or you were--?

M: I was a favorite. No, you know, I don't like to--but I might as well be honest about it; yes, I was a favorite. I got along well with the military. I think we, in many senses, talked the same language. Generationally I understood; I think I was less hostile to what it was they were trying to do and understood how certain--I think one thing, because of my age and previous experience, what I understood that a lot of young journalists didn't is that there is nothing nice about war and that a lot of the atrocities--I'm not forgiving them or condoning them--are war, that's all, folks. There's not much point in pointing the finger of blame, because that's what war is, war is brutal. It has very few virtues. That was hard for younger journalists to accept.

I think that's part of the reason. Another reason is again just age. If I wanted to talk to [William] Westmoreland or his chief of staff or other senior officers, they felt a lot more comfortable with me, again, given age, background, and I guess my willingness to assume what I call protective coloration, than they did with an alert, good young journalist who was clearly hostile.

G: Did the significance of your publication play a part here?

M: Absolutely. It was a lot easier to gain access representing *Time* than it would have been to represent the Macon, Georgia *Telegraph*. You bet. No doubt about that. And that was particularly true for access to the top. Again, I'm sure not proud of my role as a favorite, but I'm not going to deny it. When I wanted to, when I dealt with the embassy, I dealt with [Henry] Cabot Lodge. When I dealt with MACV, I dealt with Westmoreland, when that was necessary. And if I didn't deal with them and I wanted access to somebody specifically, somebody with a specific set of skills, beneath them, I had that, too. That was partly a consequence of being with *Time*, partly a consequence because I

guess they viewed me as, quote, "responsible," unquote, and partly because I played the game as a reporter. Again, I'm not proud of that, I'm just being candid about it.

G: Did officials in MACV or the embassy seek your advice, ever? Was it customary to ask the advice of journalists on particular points?

M: I think they were reasonably cautious about that. It inevitably arose, and particularly in fairly private social circumstances. If I was alone at dinner with Cabot Lodge or Westy or Max Taylor, there would be circumstances in the evening when a "what do you think?" question would arise. Only in that limited sense.

G: Thinking back over this experience, can you recall any particular occasions where journalists had a substantive part in the decision-making process or helping to formulate a solution to a problem?

M: I think Bob Shaplen did.

G: Did he?

M: Yes.

G: Can you--?

M: The only specific I can give you is not within my own experience, I simply read about it in Frank Snepp's book [*Decent Interval*]. In the closing days Bob was actually an intermediary, or so Mr. Snepp tells me. I'm not disinclined to believe that because I know with what respect Bob was held by the entire American mission, throughout various intervals of the war. I think Bob's advice was directly sought by a number of people and on a number of occasions. My guess, and it would be a guess, would be that it had some influence at various points, at various junctures.

Now, any others? I can't think of any others. We're talking generalizations now. I'm not saying that there was any policy position to reject everything any journalist said. It was just that--I remember one time Westy said, "Frank, you must understand that in my job I don't have any choice, I've got to be an optimist." That's a profoundly important

statement. I think within that sort of framework--and because there were pressures from Washington. As the Blowtorch [Robert Komer] once said, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, you must understand, I was sent here to report to the President *progress* on the war." (Laughter) You know, Komer actually said that.

So there's that driving force. And then the other one is as Westy said: If I'm going to do this job at all, I have to be an optimist. You put those two together, and what the journalists knew--I don't think there was much chance they would ever be absorbed or put to use. Sure, right from the start, [Neil] Sheehan, Dave Halberstam, Mal Browne, from that generation forward a lot of journalists knew at least as much--and particularly because they didn't tend to be compartmentalized. As for instance, an agency guy might know this, a military might know that, State Department might know that, USAID might know that. The journalists are going across all of those, and therefore frequently had a clearer consensus view than any of those parts did.

Now, if the American system had worked, all those parts would report in and up here somewhere you'd get--but it never did. As I think I told you earlier, the reporting system constantly broke down, again for a series of reasons. First, because people at the top didn't want to hear what a lot of their field officers were telling them, and secondly, because [of] the squeeze process. What started out as forty pages at the provincial level was ordered to arrive at Saigon in two pages, and in Washington in a paragraph. Now, in a political war like that one was, you cannot attend to the all-important subtleties when you do that. So a lot was just wrung out in the process. And again, the second factor was that they didn't want to hear it.

G: Did the journalists ever perform a role of informal conduits of information from the U.S. officials? Were they ever enlisted in this manner, do you recall?

M: Again, all I know about that is what Snepp told me, and I assume that's correct. I don't have much doubt that he's correct on that. But no, I think more important than that, any

journalist who was under any illusion when he dealt, for instance, with anybody dealing in intelligence-- CIA, State Department, military--that that officer was dealing with you because he liked you or believed in the free press, hey, you were being pumped just as hard as he was and probably a lot more effectively. Now, in that sense, yes. Again, at the hands-on, field-officer level, I think a lot of people found what journalists knew to be valuable. And as I say, the good ones pumped you a lot harder and a lot more effectively than you did them.

G: What about your relationship with the journalists from other countries?

M: Much more limited than it should have been.

G: Really?

M: I knew a few Frenchmen; I knew, not surprisingly, because of the language barriers, a lot more Brits and Aussies. I can only remember one German that I knew and I remember him because he was weird. I'm embarrassed to admit it, I didn't really know any Japanese or any other Asian correspondents. I maybe nodded to them but I didn't really know them. And I guess that's about the extent of it.

G: Did they fraternize at the Caravelle Hotel with the Americans? Did they have their own--?

M: Yes, I think they had their own. Let me say that I would like to think, and I think the record would bear it out, I wasn't much of a member of the Caravelle set. I didn't hang around there much, nor did any of our people. My impression--and I would have to be honest with you, that's all it is, my impression is no, that they do exactly like they do everywhere else, they split up in their own groups, just like they do in American schools today.

G: I wanted to ask you to give some perceptions of various personalities and programs. First I wanted you to evaluate Harkins and Westmoreland. Harkins I guess was only there a short time while you were there.

M: The overlap was about four or five or six months. I see no reason to revise my original impression that Paul Harkins was absolutely ineffective, did not understand the nature of the war, and was not terribly effective even in his relations with his own troops, all of whom were advisers then.

I think Westmoreland was light years removed from that. I think he arrived with an almost total lack of sophistication, which led him into, I think, a lot of early errors. I think that by the time he left he was pretty realistic. He had begun to grasp the dimensions of political warfare, the kind of war he was in, and found that there wasn't a hell of a lot he could do about it. I think had it been a World War II situation in which the goal was win at any cost and if you had to destroy a civilian population in order to do that, Westmoreland would have, quote, "won." I doubt that would have changed the ultimate course of political history there, but I think it would have won the military thing. It wasn't that kind of a war; it couldn't be done. It couldn't be done because, to begin with, it wasn't our war. Our purpose wasn't to go to Southeast Asia in order to defeat the communists in North Vietnam, our purpose was to defend the South Vietnamese. That meant that except in rare circumstances there was no point in destroying the South Vietnamese in order to save them. So that was a severe limitation; that was totally different from World War II, a distinction that a lot of Americans haven't grasped to this day.

But in any event, that did limit him. I think, again in the other context, had that existed Westmoreland would have won the war. I think he wound up with a somewhat more than reasonably realistic and sophisticated view of the entire thing, the politics, the military problems, the geopolitical problems. I don't think he had that when he came there; I think he had it by the time he left. That was not true of his predecessor.

G: Okay. Do you think that his subordinates' attitude toward him reflected this evolution, and was this reflected in their attitude toward Harkins as well?

M: I don't know. The Harkins question, I would have to say I really don't know. I know that there were a lot of--well, not a lot of, because there weren't that many there, but there were a number of flag-officer ranked officers in Harkins' command who thought he was a buffoon. That doesn't make him one. I never heard that about Westmoreland. I think there were a lot of people there who disagreed with things he did. I think there were a lot of people there who disagreed--for instance, whether the order of battle figures were laundered or not, I know, because I was in that fight in Vietnam, a lot of officers thought that what he did was indefensible. I must tell you next with that, that I think that the misinterpretation there--and I don't think this came out clearly at the Westmoreland-CBS trial--the misinterpretation was that the direction for that didn't come from William Childs Westmoreland, it came from Lyndon B. Johnson. Now, maybe not in specific statements. I think that the initiative, the impulse to launder those figures, came from Washington.

G: Let me ask you to go into detail on this and first talk about the laundering as you perceived it.

M: I'm not at all certain of these dates, but it would seem to me it would be sometime maybe beginning late in 1966 and extending into 1967 and maybe into 1968, somewhere in that span. Because we're coming to a time now where critical judgments had to be made as to whether this was doable, can we do this or not? Obviously a major component of that decision-making process is intelligence estimates. When you're in Saigon at that time, if you didn't specifically know, you sensed that this process was under way, so you began--as a lot of journalists did--to work that area harder. Even if that meant missing this week's battles, you began to work it harder. In the process of that, I and the people who worked for me out there became aware that people in the agency and military intelligence were outraged by what they perceived to be a deliberate warping of their figures, a deliberate cutback.

As I remember it--and I'm not at all certain that I can tell you that this is the way I saw it at the time, and how much of this is simply hindsight or conclusions I reached later. The question was a fairly simple one: How do you account, what weight do you give, body for body, to the paramilitary? I think that was a foolish question. My view of that was that they counted at least as much as any main force soldier, and the reason I say that is that neither the Viet Cong nor even the North Vietnamese would have been able to survive very long without the protective coloration, the shelter, the food, and all the things that every hamlet among the thirty thousand provided them. Now, how was that maintained? It wasn't because the villagers necessarily loved these folks or supported them. There were people there inside the hamlet, who were going to be there long after those troops left, who damn well maintained the discipline, and they maintained discipline by killing you if you didn't.

Now, were they lightly armed? Sure, they were very lightly armed. Were they any threat to American units? No, they weren't any threat to--well, they were a very limited threat to American units. They were sure as hell a threat to a villager. I mean, you didn't have to be very heavily armed to kill him. Now, that's how the discipline was maintained and therefore, again, if you go back to my thesis that without the shelter, in the broadest sense of that word, that the hamlets provided, the other side couldn't have fought the war, it's ridiculous not to count them. My recollection is that's where the argument largely centered, over how those bodies were to be weighted in account. The policy decision--and I don't know where this was reached. I've now read in the process of the trial that there were a number of conferences on this, but I didn't know at the time that there was an argument over it. And how the policy--I doubt, frankly, I doubt the trial account that the policy decision was reached as a consequence of those conferences. I think the policy decision was reached at the top levels in Washington and accepted, finally accepted grudgingly by those conferences. I may be wrong in that.

So if I am right in that theory, then CBS' finger of blame at Westmoreland was accurate, but in a lot of ways unfair. Let me put that [another way]. If that thesis is right, what Westy was being was simply a good soldier. He either was directed or felt that his commander wanted him to arrive at a more politically palatable set of figures. I think that's what he was trying to get at in his defense, and I think he was too good a soldier even to this day to say that specifically. But I think that's what he wanted people to understand, that whatever happened, I did it only because I thought it was my duty to do it. I may be dead wrong, but that's the way it looks to me now.

G: Any other evidence while you were there that tended to support that they were laundering the figures?

M: Well, body counts were always laundered. You know, it didn't make any difference what you shot, dogs, rats, monkeys, a lot of old people, anything else, it became part of the body count. And sometimes those weren't even there. Body counts were consistently exaggerated because promotions and careers often depended on them. Why did they? Because once again, the mind set was Komer's: "Hey folks, you misunderstand, I was sent here to report on progress. You're going to have progress, you've got to kill people." So that was it. That was an invariable.

G: Okay. Let's talk about the ambassadors. You've got Lodge and Maxwell Taylor. First, how would you rate Henry Cabot Lodge when he was--?

M: I think Cabot was effective. He was a good politician and that was an absolutely necessary thing. As a Brahmin, he really--the Vietnamese respected him. He was a man of stature. I think that they respected him in that. And I think in general terms Cabot was effective, less so the second term than the first. And I think that was a consequence of two things: the passage of time; he was a little tireder the second time out, and then--I never heard him express this but I had every reason to believe it--a growing sense of disillusionment. Of the two, though, I think Max Taylor was far brighter.

G: Really?

M: Yes. Really an intelligent man. Not much of a politician, but with a very sophisticated mind, capable of grasping a lot of things and with, frankly, just more physical energy than Cabot had. Cabot did not exactly break his back in either of his terms there. Max Taylor worked hard. I think the limiting factor on Max was that he went there with a clear knowledge that he was going to be there briefly and gone, that he was there for a specific time for a specific purpose, and I think that kept him maybe from pushing hard for some things that he understood that other people didn't want to understand. I think he thought if it doesn't do any good, I'm going to be out of here. Largely because of Cabot's longer tenure, I would say then that he was slightly more effective. If I were to measure it another way, I would say that I think Max Taylor was the better of the two in that job.

G: Did Taylor's military experience help him in his ambassadorial role?

M: Yes, it helped him two ways. First place, it made it a lot easier for him to deal at a personal and professional level with military people than Cabot. Certainly the military people gave Cabot Lodge all the respect he wanted and were properly deferential to him as the senior man in the mission. When they talked to Taylor, they knew that when they talked tactics, he understood that too, and I think that gave him a long leg up. There were people in the military command who liked Max Taylor a lot less than they liked Cabot Lodge, and the reason for that was that I think Taylor almost from the outset harbored more doubts, or if he didn't harbor more doubts, he was more willing to express them.

G: Was this apparent to you in conversation with him?

M: Yes, absolutely. One of his basic doubts was that--I noticed it, I glanced at it this morning--one of his basic doubts, to repeat what I told you before, was the value of investing more and more American bodies, because his argument was that inevitably the Vietnamese were going to say, "If you want the war, you take it," and what you're going to wind up with is Americans fighting and South Vietnamese, relatively speaking, not

fighting. Now, that's highly relative, because as I think you know, I think it was only at most a handful of weeks during the entire war when American casualties exceeded those of the South Vietnamese. So even when we said they're not fighting much, that wasn't really so. But in relative terms, that's exactly what happened: Every time the American commitment increased in both psychological and in literal terms, the South Vietnamese commitment decreased. He was right. I don't think anybody wanted to hear that. I think it was a very shrewd, very wise caution that nobody wanted to hear.

That sort of judgment did nothing to make him a favorite of Westy and of Westy's staff. That really irritated him. And for understandable, even justifiable reasons. A field commander says, "Hey, give me the troops and I'll do it."

G: Another contrast of the two was the fact that Lodge was a Republican and had run on the opposing ticket, and presumably would feel no great loyalty other than his ambassadorial post to the current administration, whereas Taylor, a military man--

M: Had come out of the Democratic administration. I mean, he rose to his pinnacle of power in the United States under Jack Kennedy.

G: Yes. Was there a difference in loyalty to Lyndon Johnson, let's say?

M: No.

G: To the fortunes of the Democratic Party?

M: No. To the administration? No, I don't think so. If there was, it utterly escaped me. No, I saw no evidence of that whatsoever.

G: One of the major points in David Halberstam's book *The Powers That Be* is that your stories were given a very different slant by the editors in New York, and let me ask you to address this point and explain to what extent you think this occurred.

M: I think it occurred. Maybe I ought to try to explain the reasons I believe it occurred. First place, I think it was *Time*'s unofficial but fairly solid position that that was indeed the right war at the right place at the right time. After being there awhile I was no longer

persuaded of that, so I think there was that fundamental difference. I think secondly--and I believe you and I went over this earlier--Vietnam as a war, as a nation, as a people, was so far outside the American frame of reference that editors did not grasp what it was we were trying to tell them. The words were there, the facts were there. They didn't come through to *Time* editors; they didn't come through to a lot of people in Washington. It's a strange thing. I'm not at all sure I've ever seen this happen in the English language before, and the only explanation I have for it is that the frames of reference were so totally different that it didn't get through.

So if you combine those two, what you had over a considerable period of time was an upbeat, we-can-do-it/we-are-doing-it attitude in New York, and an increasing degree of cynicism and pessimism--well, maybe not, maybe cynicism is too strong--skepticism, strong skepticism and even pessimism in the field from Saigon. In the best of all possible worlds what would have been reflected was that growing skepticism backed up, I would hope, by fact. What you had instead was a rejection of the skepticism and a perpetuation for a matter of almost four years of oh, no, no, no, no, you people out there misunderstand, we're winning this.

G: How did you become aware that your stories were--?

M: Keep in mind that ten, eleven, twelve people were filing, out of Saigon, prodigious amounts of copy every week. Ten days later you'd get a look at the two magazines, so I think what preserved your sanity is that ten days later was so far after the fact that you didn't pay a hell of a lot of attention. By that time you had been off on another two rounds of more stories. So you just said, "Well, that's the way it is," and let it go. Eventually it wore you down.

G: Of course, I don't have your dispatches that you filed, but I have read the stories and it seems to me that there's a tremendous amount of skepticism in those stories as they were published, until the U.S. involvement.

M: Absolutely. That's exactly [it], you're right. And I would like to draw that distinction. Yes, that's absolutely right. Let me give you an example, though, going back to the period, and it symbolizes the problem you had. In the first place, in addition to saying the magazine's position, understandably, was that all Americans in Vietnam were heroes and in this early period you mentioned, that basically maybe all Vietnamese were kind of bums. Okay. Now, let's go from there and we go to Plei Me, a special forces camp in the Highlands. Plei Me, being a special forces camp, has a special forces A team of twelve Americans. What happened is that Plei Me came under siege by a regiment of regulars from North Vietnam. Now, this is fairly early in the war; this is probably the summer of 1965. There have not been a lot of confirmed instances of North Vietnamese in regimental strength. And gradually that was increased to two regiments. The response to that siege was South Vietnamese; two South Vietnamese regiments met the two North Vietnamese regiments in an open-arms clash around that camp, and they beat them. Now that was a big story. That was the way it was covered; that was the way it was filed. The camp was heroic, there was no doubt about it. I mean, it was remarkable that they survived this, it was just truly remarkable that they did, and the camp's survival was in no small part due to the heroism of the big guy who--I told you I was going to forget names. I didn't think I'd ever forget this name. He was the commander of the aborted mission to rescue the hostages in Tehran, Bull--if I strain I won't get it.

G: Is it [Charlie] Beckwith?

M: Beckwith. Thank you. Okay, that, too, was reported, Beckwith's heroism, but it was certainly subordinate to the far more significant fact that for the first time in the war the South Vietnamese regulars had met the North Vietnamese regulars and they whipped them, hands down they whipped them. They drove them off with heavy casualties. The *Time* story that appeared, I mean it was straight out of John Wayne. And what happened is that I guess by throwing rocks and brandishing his fists and being tough, Beckwith had

driven off two North Vietnamese regiments. Now, that's the sort of warping that really finally gets to you. That's the way it emerged. Even Beckwith, who was a violent man, was absolutely outraged by that. Next time I saw him, he said, "I'm going to whip you." And for one of the very rare times in Vietnam, I had to say, "Now, wait a minute, hold on. I did not do that." I tried to avoid that, for obvious reasons; you'd destroy your own credibility. I just said, "I don't do that, they do that in New York." And for one of the very [few times]--because I thought he would whip me--I said, "Hey, wait a minute now. I did not do that. That is not the way I reported it." But he was outraged by it. Now, that is sort of a symbol of what the problem was.

G: Do you think there was any pressure at all from the administration to reflect that slant, or was it simply Luce's own view of things?

M: I think primarily the latter, but the other was present. Lyndon had easy access to Hedley Donovan, or Luce before that. Walter [Henry?] Luce was dead before the American combat involvement began. He had access to Hedley, and Hedley had access to him. Let us be fair: If the President of the United States calls and suggests that you don't really know what you're talking about and your fellow out in Saigon doesn't know what he's talking about and maybe you're even being a trifle disloyal, that's hard not to respond to that. My conviction was then and would remain now, he probably knows more than anybody else in the world about that war. In hindsight I think I was wrong. I don't think he did know any more. I don't think he knew much about that war at all.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 2

G: Let me ask you to describe any attempts on your part to have the stories more accurately presented in the magazine.

M: They were probably more limited than they could have been, and there was a practical reason for that. Generally speaking, you know *Time* was then and still is, quote, "an editor's magazine." That meant that correspondents inescapably are second-class

citizens. Generally speaking in any society, including that one, second-class citizens don't prevail over first-class citizens. You could make the arguments, but the more vehement you became, the less effective you were. So what the efforts would consist of would be an occasional protesting letter or memo to your own boss, the chief of correspondents, and that didn't do much good. An occasional protest when each of us visited New York saying, "Gee, I think you guys overstated that" or "I don't believe it's that way," and in all truthfulness not a lot more. I'd like to tell you how bold we were within that context, but it was not much more than that.

G: Would you say that overall, Halberstam's account of the situation was accurate?

M: Yes, essentially accurate, yes. Without going into detail, because obviously I'm in no position to know all the detail. But I will tell you this, that the frame that he created was absolutely accurate.

G: What was the perception of Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam, particularly early on when he assumed office, the first year or so?

M: Yes, the first year, I think the clearest impression had nothing to do with Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam, or Lyndon Johnson even in foreign policy. It had to do with him essentially as an enormously energetic, populist politician who really had a whip hand over Congress. I'm talking about a non-American impression. I'm not sure I know what the South Vietnam impression was. That's how you still saw Lyndon Johnson.

I have a theory, and let me emphasize that it is a theory. Let's move ahead now into March 1965. The Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade comes to Da Nang. It takes up defensive positions around Da Nang airport. It's there with nothing happening for three or four days and then a few mortar shells begin to fall out in the outer perimeters and you've got a casualty or two. So then you extend, sensibly, you start to move patrols and outposts out. Three weeks, I'd say, arbitrarily, after the Ninth MEB has arrived, two kids are out on patrol one night and both of them get killed. The company commander feels

personally absolutely responsible for that, and he's going to find ways to respond. So does the battalion commander; so does the commander of the Ninth MEB, so does the commandant of the Marine Corps, so do the chiefs of staff, and so, more than anybody else, does Lyndon Johnson. That's where it's started: "Hey, those kids are killed and I sent them there and, by God, that's not going to happen again!" So what do you do? You push the patrols out a little further. In order to push the patrols out a little further, you've got to give them more air support. You give them more air support; you've got a force in being now and there's almost no way to stop that now. That's where, now, as that process took place and accelerated, the perception of Lyndon Johnson changed totally, and the perception then became a guy who was pushing a war that he didn't understand.

G: But from the first he was not viewed as someone who was more eager than, say, his predecessor to increase American involvement?

M: No. Because again, at least as I remember it, and then certainly-- maybe I'd be safest in just confining this to what I remember, because I don't think I can get in other people's heads. That was not my image of Lyndon Johnson. My image of Lyndon Johnson had very little to do with Vietnam; it had to do, again, with an enormously effective Texas politician with a strong populist streak who could ram damn near anything through Congress, and that was the image of him.

G: One of the things that he rammed through Congress was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

M: Gulf of Tonkin.

G: Let me ask you to recall what you remember about the Gulf of Tonkin episode, from your own viewpoint.

M: Now keep in mind, when you're in Saigon or elsewhere, we heard about it late. It was way after the fact that even the first whispers [were heard] that something had happened in the Gulf of Tonkin. I don't know whether I'm talking about a matter of days or weeks, but it was certainly in journalistic terms way after the fact. It did create a lot of curiosity,

and each of us--or not each of us, a lot of journalists did what they could then to find out what the circumstances really were. It was a matter mostly of luck. My wife had dinner one night in Hong Kong for two young sailors off the *Morton*, I think--

G: The *Maddox*.

M: The *Maddox*, I guess, yes, the *Maddox*. They told her unequivocally there hadn't been any torpedoes; there was no such thing. They thought it was hilarious; they thought it was very funny. More and more fragments over a period of time like that came up. Were they definitive? No, but they were sure suspicious. That piece of information, for instance, that these two young seamen would say that, then that makes you curious enough so you do what you can to check the rest. And I can't remember the sequence at all; I think what happened was a feint. Again, I'm reconstructing, I don't have any facts here. This is trying, as I did, to come up with something rational out of what you had after a time. I think there was a feint by torpedo boats off the North Vietnamese shore. I think there was an understandable panicky response aboard--was that the *Austin* or the *Maddox*? Oh, it doesn't make any difference, whichever the first destroyer was that was--

G: The first one was the *Maddox*, then it was the *Turner Joy*, yes.

M: Yes, the *Maddox*. I think people, quote, "saw," unquote, a lot of things that didn't really exist. It's understandable. Hell, we've all done the same thing. And from that everything else flowed. Now, let me emphasize again, that's a scenario; I don't know that as fact. But most of what I gathered after the fact seems to fit that scenario pretty well.

G: Was it more difficult for journalists to learn about naval actions than on land?

M: Yes, simply because you had lesser chance to be physically present. And the navy characteristically, traditionally, was just more reluctant to deal. . . .

G: Really?

M: Yes. You know, you'd go out to carriers. Matter of fact, if you were lucky you could even fly strikes off carriers occasionally in twin-seated attack planes. There was a really

foolish enormous operation called Blue Marlin, which was a major assault, amphibious landing on the coast near Qui Nhon, and the navy let I think five of us go on that. So you got an occasional glimpse, but it was really only a glimpse.

G: And you went--?

M: Yes, I went on Blue Marlin.

G: Let me ask you to recall what you can about that one.

M: Blue Marlin involved probably two divisions of troops, American and Vietnamese, a dozen or so LSTs, five or six destroyers, a couple of jeep carriers. I mean, it was a major flotilla. First you've got to recognize that there were a lot of ships out here. Okay, we stage and a typhoon comes in. So for three days everybody would ride off the shore out there, everybody is seasick and if not visible by eye from the shore, certainly visible on radar and everything. We're sitting out there, finally the typhoon quiets and still we've got fifteen-foot swells. We drowned a lot of people. We charge up, to what? There wasn't anything there but water buffalo, obviously. If there ever was, and I assume there was, any enemy troops there, three days before the first landing craft left, the LSTs, they were gone. So it turned into, as so many things did, a massive, totally fruitless, frustrating walk in the sun. And again, in those swells, particularly the South Vietnamese marines, who had no experience at all, were going over in landing nets and dropping in landing boats, you know, a lot of them were drowned and crushed and everything else. So at a considerable expense it was an absolute zilch.

I don't think--well, this is probably an exaggeration. I was going to say, I don't think I can remember even hearing a shot fired in anger in that whole thing. That's probably a slight exaggeration, but I certainly do not remember any engagement.

G: The *Time* articles reflect consistent leaking of operations to the enemy, that they just seemed to know what was coming. Anything that had any length of time in the planning was something that. . . . Was this the case?

M: Yes, absolutely. You know, we now have the clear explanation that when the South Vietnamese government fell, we now know it was infiltrated by, what? I think it's either thirty thousand or sixty thousand or somewhere between those two, active, aggressive and effective communist agents. As the South Vietnamese accurately suspected, Saigon was an absolute sieve. And since there had to be some coordination--now, there were American operations where the South Vietnamese were cut out, which goes back to Max Taylor's thesis. You did that in order to preserve security and now you have taken over the war. But in any event, it was almost impossible to do any planning without. . . .

And another thing, too. For instance, on B-52 raids, that Russian trawler rode off Guam there, off Agana, the entire war. When the B-52s took off, the radio signals went to every ground unit in the. . . . The one thing I was never able to figure out, how did they know where the B-52s were going? But almost invariably, I think, and I don't know this for a fact, but to the best [of my] ability to discern and the intelligence officers to discern, when the B-52s arrived, whatever was there ten hours before or eight hours before when they left Guam was long gone before they got there. I remember the first B-52 assault I saw, and they went down a ridge line. This was at the Ia Drang. There was an enormous massif to the west of Ia Drang Valley, and I can't remember the name of it. It loomed up four or five thousand feet off the plain there. The B-52s went right down that ridge. You couldn't see them, but those bombs walked right down that ridge. The whole ridge erupted. It tore it up for four miles. Pieces of it would go up, *Whooo*, and the next one and the next one. It just rolled down the ridge with precise accuracy. So clearly there would be no way in the world any human being on that ridge could have survived. [We] start up there and find out that they either survived or they weren't quite on that ridge, because the ground fire had not diminished one whit.

G: Amazing. Again, from reading the articles it appears that the air war began with obsolete planes.

M: Yes, A-1s.

G: T-28s, I guess.

M: Yes. Yes. Well, that ought to be corrected a little bit. Those were the weapons employed in support of South Vietnamese units during the advisory period. By the time Americans were involved there were jets.

G: Really?

M: And when we went north, those were all modern weapons. The first responses north were in response to the Qui Nhon billet bombing and the Pleiku bombing, in reverse order. Those were jets. But yes, out in the support of the South Vietnamese, the A-1s [were used], either flown sometimes by Americans, more often by South Vietnamese.

G: In terms of the objectives of the bombing, you recalled one case where the B-52s were not effective in clearing a ridge of enemy infantry. What about cutting off supply lines, bridges, stopping infiltration, things of that nature?

M: Yes. Well, at the time I certainly had, and I think most of us had, a deep suspicion as to how effective it was. In the first place, it's just physically very difficult for any bomb, even a one-ton bomb, to be effective in triple canopy jungle. Unless it falls right on you it's not likely to harm you very much. In the second place, you can't be around any war very long when you begin to have a lot of doubts about the accuracy of air power. In the third place, you were not able to destroy an infrastructure consisting of buildings, factories, railroads and that sort of thing; that wasn't what you were trying to bomb. So for those and other reasons the doubts began to build up that it was doing much. And I think maybe [in] the fourth place and most important of all was an American misunderstanding of the pain thresholds. As it turned out, the Vietnamese as a people and as military people were just--once again, this is frame of reference--just did not have the same kind of pain thresholds a western society would, either in terms of being

bombed out in the jungle or being bombed in Hanoi. They were simply more capable of absorbing misery than I think an organized, western society could do it.

So those doubts all existed. Now, in hindsight, out of [Vo Nguyen] Giap's journals and everything else, it turned out we were largely right. They were not effective. They were troubling and nobody liked them and they killed a lot of people. It didn't come anywhere near stopping or even seriously hampering the movement of goods and people.

G: How did a journalist cover the air war?

M: Almost always in hindsight, unless it was tactical. North, you couldn't cover it at all. To the best of my knowledge nobody was ever permitted to make a raid to the North. We always thought we were going to get one because the air force and navy were always saying, "Well, maybe we'll take you on the next one." To the best of my knowledge, nobody got to make one of those rides. Certainly I didn't, and I don't know anybody who did. When B-52s were employed as semi-tactical weapons, like that ridge line I described to you, and you happened to be with that unit, you could cover it in that sense. Close air support, if you were with a unit, you saw it. But other than examples like that, which is essentially tactical air, you've covered it after the fact. You didn't know where it was going, so there was no way to cover it the other way. Every now and then you got a chance to ride. I rode a couple of times in the old Canberras on air strikes, and you could cover it from that point of view. I don't think you ever learned anything more. All I did is get airsick.

G: *Time* did a cover feature on Robbie Risner, who was captured shortly thereafter.

M: Right after that, shot down in a Thud [F-105]. Well, he wasn't shot down. The Thud--an F-105 did what so many F-105s did, just quit running, and he crashed and was captured and, as you know, survived six years in prison camp.

G: Something like that, yes.

M: That's the sad story. I don't know. I really don't know. I don't want to get in that argument because I don't know anything about it. I can't believe the Robbie Risner I knew was the guy that [James] Stockdale and other people said was in that--it just doesn't square. It's obvious I was not present in the camp, but I find it very--I can't put much credence in those charges.

G: Do you think that the publicity that he received before his capture influenced the--?

M: You bet. You're reading my mind. That's what I think it mostly was.

G: Let me ask you about what was once described as the "side show," Cambodia and Laos.

M: Yes.

G: Did you have any feel for the extent to which the war was moving into these areas?

M: Yes, a feel; that's not a bad word, a feel or a suspicion, because there were some circumstances which you couldn't explain if there hadn't been some sort of American presence in either of those places. There were constant whispers, Black Hand stuff, special forces stuff. But at least as far as I was concerned, confirmation, no, nothing resembling it.

Now, subsequently, I was a good friend of Bob Rheault's, who was the special forces commander when that triple agent was attached to some tire irons and thrown into the Nha Trang Bay. Rheault and his entire command structure were arrested and were going to be court-martialed, and then the whole thing flared up into a big--[Creighton] Abrams, who hated the special forces, finally backed off; Rheault and all the officers resigned and came home. I was a good enough friend of Bob's, and I was also back in the States then. But earlier, I had pretty good reason to believe that there were certain operations moving into Cambodia and Laos. I think I misunderstood them. My view of it was that they were what was called LRPs, long-range patrols, just going out there for intelligence purposes. What I subsequently learned is that some of them were a good deal more than that, that they involved four and five hundred men being dropped with

both the mission and the capacity to destroy sizeable enemy contingents. But at the time of those, no; again, no more than suspicions, no more than feelings.

G: Was this an essential part of stopping the flow of men and arms down the Ho Chi Minh Trail?

M: Absolutely. Let's face it, all--

(Interruption)

--[it] did was move it a little westward over the trail, that's exactly what you would do. As it also turned out, after the war was over we found out that a lot of the trail right down through Vietnam had been essentially untouched and what damage there had been in the bombing was relatively insignificant; again, in a triple canopy jungle and the very clever construction they did and all that. But let's assume for the moment that interdiction had proved troubling. All you had to do is pick up and move eight miles west across the border. So it became an impossible, frustrating, intolerable situation for the American military, which found itself being flanked constantly.

G: How about air power in terms of providing air cover for ground operations? Was it more effective here, in an immediate situation?

M: Yes, this is probably generational. I think it was more effective in Korea. It may have had something to do with the terrain, where the terrain was more open, but it just seems to me it was far more precise. It seems to me there were far fewer incidents of laying the stuff on your own troops and there was much greater, even pinpoint accuracy of laying that stuff down a hundred yards ahead of you. Maybe that's fading memory, but that's the way it seemed to me.

G: Okay. [Nguyen Cao] Ky, before he took over the premiership, alluded several times to some secret raids on North Vietnam. Do you think these ever took place and can you tell me about them?

M: They were just about what he described. They--and I'll have to say this the same way--to the best of my knowledge, no Americans participated in those. I would say, though, that Americans both planned and encouraged those. I don't think I can say they directed them. But they helped in the planning, they helped select the targets, they helped to plan tactics for getting in and out, and I think they were strongly encouraged by Americans. I guess I would doubt that the American role ran beyond that. I'm almost certain that no Americans flew in those. Because when Americans did begin to fly, there wasn't any doubt; that was in direct retaliation, as I say, first for Pleiku and then for Qui Nhon. There wasn't any doubt about that; we all knew that was Americans that did that.

G: The Chieu Hoi program.

M: Yes. I laugh, because like everybody else, I was taken on that.

G: Tell me about it.

M: I remember the first time I went out I thought, gee, wow, that's interesting, and I went to a Chieu Hoi camp, always necessarily through an interpreter, and gathered the story and came away convinced that that hard-eyed North Vietnamese major really had seen the light and he was now a practicing lower-case democrat and dedicated to the principles of democracy and freedom, and just let him at his old--he wasn't at all, he was there organizing the Chieu Hoi camp. I reported that way first, wide-eyed. Oh, man, this really works! You ought to see what they've done to this guy! Subsequently, a number of years later, Hubert Humphrey was at--I can't remember--the Chieu Hoi camp out at Vung Tau, and one of the, quote, "ralliers" there was a really murderous s.o.b. of a North Vietnamese major also. Everybody in camp was scared to death of that guy, including the Americans. Somebody identified him for Lyndon [Hubert?] as one of the chief ralliers and the guy was coming around in order to tell Hubert. And Hubert, in typical Humphrey style, strode up to this guy, threw his arm around him, had pictures of himself taken on television camera [and] otherwise proclaiming this new democrat and the wave

of the future and here's how we're going to win. The guy was trying to edge out from under Hubert's arm--

(Laughter)

--and it was a really sad little scene because it was perfectly representative of every American's, and certainly including Hubert's, inability to understand what was happening here. The Chieu Hoi movement in sum was so infiltrated right from the first, what happened is what they did with everything, the North Vietnamese immediately put it to their use. They turned it right around and infiltrated, they [inaudible]. They converted it into a weapon of their own.

G: How would they use it?

M: You'd pour very substantial resources in there on the assumption that you're going to convert these people. You've got agents inside the camp who say, "You convert and you're going to be slit from here to here by morning." You didn't convert anybody. You converted very, very few. Now, the few who did, quote, "convert"--the North Vietnamese--and went to operational units, how do you know what they did when they got to the operational units? Maybe their purpose in being with an operational unit now was to let those folks across the way know what you were really going to do tomorrow morning.

G: Yes.

M: It's a demonstration, again, of American reasoning, the American frame of reference, being brought to bear on a situation where it doesn't bear. The favorite little anecdote I can tell you about that has almost nothing to do with the war, but it so symbolizes it--I've got two.

Oh, in 1964 probably, USAID said, "Hey, the reason South Vietnam has become a rice-deficient nation is that damn rats are eating 26 per cent or something of the crop every year. What do we do? Hey, let's give it a profit motive. That's a good American

approach. So we'll pay five piasters per rat tail for farmers to turn in rats, and we'll reduce the rat population and have more rice." The program was launched. I want to tell you, the rat tails came in by the ton, and rice production seemed to keep dropping, and finally somebody figured out that the farmers had quit raising rice and were raising rats. (Laughter)

Because they could make a lot more money off of rat tails than they could anything else.

All right, that was one. The other one, a special forces camp, I think it was near Dak To--anyhow, in the Highlands, it didn't make any difference where it was--requested a few, a very few highly-trained war dogs. Somebody in the Pentagon said, "Well, if two war dogs would help them, a hundred and eighty ought to end the war." So I guess they whomped up a really big special program at Fort Meade, trained I believe a hundred and eighty-four dogs, all of which were flown, I think, to Pleiku, unloaded, taken up in the hills, and the Montagnards ate up every one before the second day was over.

(Laughter)

Pow, pow, pow, pow, shot them all and ate them. Once again, I use those as anecdotal demonstrations of the American inability to grasp how different this is here, folks. It's like the missing locomotive at Qui Nhon.

G: The missing locomotive?

M: Yes. Now, two people in USAID whom I respect said that did not happen,and I'm almost certain it did. In the first place, the question arises, why do you want a locomotive at Qui Nhon? There wasn't a segment of the railroad anywhere out of Qui Nhon more than a hundred yards long; what are you going to do with a locomotive? But in any event, this eighty-ton locomotive was brought in. It was apparently successfully taken off the freighter that carried it, taken to shore, and the next day it was gone and nobody ever saw it again.

(Laughter)

Again, two USAID people said, "That didn't happen!" I think it did happen.

G: That' s amazing.

M: My explanation of that is, they'd say, "Where could it have gone? They didn't drive it into the bay." And my theory is, no, the Vietnamese iron dealers disassembled it overnight, took it out of there piece by piece, sold it back to melt down.

G: What year was that, do you remember?

M: That would have been 1965 or 1966.

G: Okay. How would you appraise the AID program?

M: I think generally effective, generally pretty damn effective, pretty shrewdly administered at the province level. Not many illusions, and at least in relative terms, relative to everything else Americans tried, effective. And I'm not really prepared to know how effective it was if you take it outside the theory of relativity, but it was the best of all the American programs, that's certainly. . . .

G: The strategic hamlets program?

M: That was the point at which the war began to clearly turn the wrong way. In hindsight, obviously it was totally wrong. What you did, you turned the night over to the Viet Cong. You got in there and buttoned the gates and were safe and that was the end of that. (Interruption)

G: So what they did, they simply yielded the countryside to the Viet Cong?

M: Sure. Yes. It seems so nice, so sensible, so safe. Sure you were safe in there; they didn't give a damn, because you had little pinpoints here and here and here, and everything in the countryside then belonged to the other guys.

G: Do you think in retrospect it would have been easier to secure a smaller area of South Vietnam and secure it better?

M: Yes, although I'm not sure it would have made any difference. You mean falling back to the Mekong Delta or something like that?

G: Yes.

M: Yes, I suppose so. I don't think it would have made an eventual difference. The only way you would have won it is if the South Vietnamese had sufficient motivation, discipline, courage, so that when nightfall came they were doing exactly the same thing as the Viet Cong. They were out there with rifles looking for a fight, skilled, and to the degree anybody can be in that circumstance, unafraid or certainly not afraid. If you could have started that in--I don't know what year--1962, 1963, I haven't any doubt you would have prevailed. That never happened.

G: Let me ask you about some specifics here. The execution of Ngo Dinh Can--that may be a mispronunciation--Diem's brother. This was in May, 1964. Did the U.S. do anything to try to prevent that?

M: Whose execution? They were killed in Cholon in December [November] of 1963, Diem and his brother.

G: Yes. No, no, there was another brother, apparently.

Last time we did not talk much about [Nguyen] Khanh, who was described in *Time* as one of those rubber punching bag sort of things that bounces back every time you--

M: Up, down, up, down.

G: --and he was. He was in and out all the time.

M: Right.

G: What was your assessment of him?

M: Let me admit that I started off thinking Khanh might indeed be a savior, and I am embarrassed to confess I so reported him. This was when I was saying hey, can-do, will-do. Then I spent quite a bit of time with Khanh after that off and on, and I became persuaded that he had two and only two recommendations, and that what had brought him to his position of power was, one, he was wily. He was a shrewd, wily man, with a

high survival instinct. Two, he could speak English, which tended to warp every American view of the capabilities of South Vietnamese. If you could speak English, drink bourbon, and play poker, you've got to be good. Well, Khanh didn't do the latter, he didn't drink and he didn't play poker, but he spoke English pretty well. He didn't really have any of the qualifications. He had no qualifications as a leader among South Vietnamese; they held him in contempt, for reasons that I wasn't quite clear about. And as a military figure he wasn't much.

G: But he did seem to keep re-emerging.

M: He did indeed, but that was during that period of tumult, and he re-emerged because, more than any other single reason, at given intervals he had units of the military that would respond to his orders. That's the reason he re-emerged. You know, the South Vietnamese during that period were a lot more concerned about "is he going to knock me off as premier?" than they were about what was happening in the field. Their organized units were used basically to fend each other off.

(Interruption)

G: Khanh and Maxwell Taylor seemed to have had harsh words for each other.

M: They did indeed.

G: Can you analyze their differences?

M: Yes. Going first to Taylor, he was contemptuous of Khanh as a man and as a military man. Second, Max Taylor possessed in some abundance a certain American arrogance and--keep in mind that he was contemptuous of Khanh--when he said, "This man has to straighten out and here's how I want him to do it," Khanh in effect said, "Old man, you're not going to tell me what to do; this is *my* country." That's how it started and that's how it maintained itself.

G: Was there any pressure brought to bear on Khanh?

M: Sure. His American, quote, "adviser" out of the military was another colonel [Jasper] Wilson whose [first] name I now forget, and Wilson was the carrier of those messages to Khanh. I don't think it ever--to the best I know, it never created anything in Khanh except a lot of resentment.

G: But then Khanh at least did assert a degree of independence?

M: Yes, but more out of hurt pride and stubbornness than any conviction that he was right.

G: We talked briefly the last time about the internal unrest between the Catholics and the Buddhists. Let me ask you to go into this in a little more detail, if you will.

M: I was going to say it was unparalleled. It is not unparalleled. I guess in lots of countries, religious--well, certainly in India they are, so it's not unparalleled. But the division was very deep in that--that's a meaningless phrase. What I mean by that, these people genuinely hated each other and were suspicious of each other. In political terms the Catholics thought most of the Buddhists were, if not communist, pro-communist. In political terms, most of the Buddhists thought the Catholics were privileged and existed largely to maintain privilege for those who already possessed it. I really don't know how much their respective theologies caused them to dislike each other, but I know what the political expressions of it were, and in a somewhat oversimplified manner that's where it lay, suspicious of each other [?]. I'm sure there were other roots there; the question of dividing up resources, influence within South Vietnam as a whole, and whatever other hatreds just vastly different religions produce in people. But for me the roots of it were always essentially political.

G: Did the Americans, and here I'm asking not only about the military and the diplomatic mission but also the journalists, did they tend to gravitate more toward the Catholics than the Buddhists, simply because they were more of a western. . . ?

M: Yes. Exactly. That's just exactly what my answer was going to be, because it's more westernized and easier to understand. And also because Catholic priests, although they

were Vietnamese, were somewhat more accessible and somewhat more sophisticated about what they could do with the press than the Buddhist priests were. The bonzes didn't have that experience. They're thoroughly eastern and thoroughly Asian.

So again, the Catholics were more accessible and I think made better use of the press than the Buddhists did.

G: Did you yourself have close contacts among the Buddhist leaders?

M: I guess at the time I thought they were close; I'm not so sure now. I had access to Tri Quang and. . . . There were two leaders at the time, Tri Quang was the [radical], at least in the American view and I suppose that he was the radical. What's the other one? [Thich Quang Duc?] Once again, a name escapes me.

I had access to them. I could get to them reasonably well. I never really had any sense that I understood them or that they understood me. For one thing, you have to work through an interpreter, usually through an interpreter. I was convinced, though, that Tri Quang was not anything like a conscious communist agent, and I noticed when Saigon fell he was one of the first to wind up in prison, so I couldn't have been too wrong.

G: One of the criticisms that appeared in *Time* was that the U.S. was trying too hard during this period to create sort of a League-of-Women-Voters- style good government in Saigon. Can you elaborate on that?

M: I think that criticism was essentially valid. It was based on, again, a western, an Americanized concept that when democracy works, it works for everybody. And that if you could convince the citizenry, the peasantry particularly, that their leaders were honest and responsive and that they, the peasants, had some voice in who led them, that everything would flow from that. I think that was way over the political heads of Vietnam. I think that maybe all the peasant really wanted and really expected of government, and really only understood about government, was a certain degree of

fairness and if anything happened to him, some sort of recourse. He wanted security, physical security; I suppose financial security but certainly physical security, and he wanted some element of fairness and he wanted recourse if somebody stole a pig. The abstract views of government systems I don't think even existed, and as a consequence it was a pretty hard sell. I think the South Vietnamese would have been delighted to please us if they had known what it is we had wanted, but they didn't understand what we were trying to get at.

G: The brief reign of Dr. [Phan Huy] Quat, any recollections of that?

M: Not really. Dr. Quat, before he became premier, had been one of our sources. He was always accessible. He seemed to be more frank than most Vietnamese officials. He was identified, with a snicker, by the relatively sophisticated Saigonese who were in politics as Saigon's best clap doctor.

G: Really?

M: Yes. Then when I finally got the translation--I didn't know what it was they were calling him, and I finally got a translation. That was kind of the estimate held of him. I don't really have much recollection except that he came and went like everybody else, so fast. You could hardly see him going through the revolving doors.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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FRANK McCULLOCH

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Frank McCulloch of San Francisco, California, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted in San Francisco, California on August 15, 1985 and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Frank McCulloch
Donor

Aug. 5, 1994
Date

John W. Carlin
Archivist of the United States

3-4-04
Date