

INTERVIEW II

DATE: September 16, 1981
INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS H. MOORER
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: Admiral Moorer's office, Washington, D.C.

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G: Admiral Moorer, can you give me some background about the purpose of the patrol of the destroyer Maddox in August of 1964?

M: Yes. At that time we were doing what we called peripheral reconnaissance, and it was conducted by aircraft, by submarines, and by surface ships. This type of operation was not limited to Tonkin Gulf by any means; it took place all along the coast of North Korea, and the Kurile Islands, and of course over in the Atlantic side off of various areas. In the Mediterranean sometimes we sent ships into the Black Sea, and so it was a common occurrence. At the same time, the Soviets, of course, were doing the identical thing with their trawlers, of which, as I recall, they had twenty-five or thirty, and not only were they doing peripheral reconnaissance of the United States and of the coastlines of our allies, but also they were infiltrating, joining every operation we had at sea. You'd always see a Russian trawler. So this was a routine collection of intelligence that we had been pursuing for some time.

G: The main purpose of these was what was called ELINT, I believe, is that right, electronic intelligence, sampling the enemy's electronic emissions and so forth?

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M: Yes, the vehicles used for this type of mission had that capability, of intercepting the enemy transmissions, not only transmissions of communications nature, but transmissions made by radars and by missiles and any other kind of electronic transmission. This, of course, is information that can be analyzed, and thereby you can get a fair idea of the performance characteristics, frequencies upon which these equipments operate, and it's through these sources that one can develop countermeasures.

G: I understand. I believe Secretary [Robert] McNamara testified later before one of the Senate committees that he regarded this as a routine patrol. Some people think that was a little misleading, that what the Maddox was doing was not exactly routine.

M: Well, it was; he was right about that, and as a matter of fact, it wasn't the first time at all that we'd had destroyers--the reason I'm so familiar with this, I was in command of this Seventh Fleet that supplied the ship, and of course at the time the Maddox operation actually happened, I had been moved as commander of the Pacific Fleet, of which, as you know, the Seventh Fleet is a subsidiary command. But it was routine in the sense, as I just told you, that at the same time there were many, many ships at sea worldwide doing the same thing.

G: Yes, sir. Is it fair, as has been done, to characterize the patrol of the Maddox as part of a program of--pressures is probably too strong a word, but a program of actions designed to warn the North Vietnamese that something forceful might be in store for them if they didn't lay off supporting operations in the South?

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M: No. That was of course alleged, and at that time you had Senator [William F.] Fulbright and others that held hearings, you know, subsequent to the event, at a time when the North Vietnamese propaganda and our own media had managed to generate a reversal, you might say, in support of operations in Southeast Asia, towards one that was leaning in opposition. And there were all kinds of allegations and so on brought up to the effect that this ship was operating in coordination with other activities along the coast and so on. But I know for a fact that this operation had been scheduled months and months before any kind of operation using torpedo boats and so on was scheduled in Southeast Asia. Because it was a routine requirement for the Seventh Fleet. In other words, I knew that periodically I was going to have to send a destroyer down to the Tonkin Gulf, and the fact that it was in the Tonkin Gulf at a time that other activities would be taking place right along the coastline was purely coincidental. I know that was the allegation all the time, that we were trying to provoke the North Vietnamese into taking some kind of action. And the people that couldn't prove that then accused us of reporting a fictitious attack. So they couldn't have it both ways.

G: I want to come to that.

M: One side, one group said that we were trying to deliberately provoke attack, and the other one said there wasn't an attack. We just said there was an attack so we could bomb. So it was typical of the Vietnam War, that kind of inaccurate information was spread out across the country on practically everything we did.

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G: What were your responsibilities as commander of the Pacific Fleet with regard to such a patrol as the Maddox?

M: Well, I had full responsibility in the sense that, of course, I had to approve all operations of the Seventh Fleet and was fully aware of this operation, as well as at the same time we were doing a similar operation off Petropavlovsk. So there wasn't any big deal to me, I mean, we'd done many, many before, and as I told you, I think the key point is that if you look at the record, you'll see that there [it] was on the Seventh Fleet schedule many, many months before.

G: Yes. What account did we take of the fact that the South Vietnamese were running covert operations along the coast at this time? I mean, obviously we had to take that into account for purposes of coordination and so on.

M: Well, there really was no coordination in the sense that they were linked by command structure, the idea being that the Maddox would go to the rescue of torpedo boats or something like that. That was not the case. In the first place, let me go back a bit. Operations of this nature, which were intelligence-collecting operations, were not approved by the commander of the Seventh Fleet or Pacific Fleet, or the chief of naval operations, or what have you. They were approved by a committee, a special committee, upon recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that was all civilian. It was not till the Johnson Administration, I guess, or the end of it, the very end of it, or better yet, I think it was when Mr. Nixon came in. I told him that, you know, I took all the flak for a lot of these operations when in

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fact I didn't have any authority to stop them. They were authorized by a very special committee that's had many different names; at that time I think it was called the 303 Committee, and they changed the number sometimes, but it was representatives of the secretary of defense, and the adviser to the president on national security affairs, and a member I think from the State Department and from CIA, but there were no military people on that committee. They approved any kind of peripheral or other type of intelligence-gathering operation.

G: Now, who had the responsibility for planning the operational details of an operation like the Maddox?

M: The commander of the Seventh Fleet. But there again, the operating procedure was standard. First, there was a schedule: "You will depart such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time, proceed along the following route at such-and-such a speed, and your mission is to intercept electronic emissions as well as to report anything seen or heard otherwise."

G: Were the senior officers aboard the Maddox--I believe there was a Commodore [John J.] Herrick, and the captain of the vessel was [Commander Herbert L.] Ogier, I believe that's correct--what did they know about the South Vietnamese operations? Were they told, "Don't go near here on such-and-such a day, you may get mixed up in something," something to that effect?

M: No, I don't think they were aware of the South Vietnamese operation in detail; they were aware of the fact that those kinds of operations

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were taking place. But that's proof again that had there been some intent to relate this operation of the Maddox to the South Vietnamese operations, then they would have been instructed as to what to do in the event that the South Vietnamese operations went this way or that way, and they were not. Because, again, it comes back to the fact that the Maddox was involved in a prescheduled routine operation that we were doing over and over again worldwide.

G: Yes. There have been allegations--I'm sure you are well aware of all the allegations that have been made in this connection.

M: Oh, yes.

G: But there have been allegations that the best case is that the Maddox unintentionally provoked the North Vietnamese by approaching, shall we call it a sore spot on the North Vietnamese coast that had recently been raided, maybe only the day before.

M: Well, in the first place, there again is a lot of nonsense, because the Maddox presented a far larger radar target than did the torpedo boats that had been involved in the thing. The Maddox was traveling perhaps one-half or less the speed that these boats always darted around at, so even an inexperienced radar operator would not confuse the Maddox with a high-speed torpedo boat. Also, the Maddox definitely did not enter territorial waters claimed by the North Vietnamese, which was twelve miles, and neither did it ever head for the beach and close in headed for the beach; it was always going parallel to the coast.

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G: Didn't the Maddox in fact approach some of the North Vietnamese islands rather closely?

M: Well, I think that the islands that were involved--I think you are speaking of Hon Me, I believe that name of it is--

G: Hon Me, I think that's right.

M: But they simply had a line, they take the chart and they measure off twelve miles and stay outside that line, it's that simple.

G: Have you got an explanation that you're satisfied with yourself as to why the North Vietnamese initiated the first attack? Have you ever decided for yourself why they did it?

M: Yes, I think that they at that point in time had decided that they were going--as a matter of fact, they'd put out a message that said--and we already knew about this; we got that at the same time--something to the effect, "Get ready to make war." That's the way it was, "Get ready to make war."

G: How did we intercept that? That's interesting?

M: What?

G: Did the Maddox intercept that, or how did we know that that message existed, that it was--?

M: It was intercepted I think by the Maddox, or some other means, by perhaps maybe an aircraft or something. But anyway, it was intercepted. So we knew that they were getting ready to conduct some kind of naval operation, but at the same time we'd been through this two or three times along the China coast, and even up into around Petropavlovsk. And of course the orders were not to withdraw in the face of some kind

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of a threat like that, because if we did that, we couldn't go anyplace. All the other side would have to say is threaten or put out a message and say, "Well, let's go out and attack the Americans," and then we would always run away. You know, we always got to hold our ground; it wasn't until the Pueblo incident when we began to get soft and back away, and you had the same thing that has been going on for about ten years in Libya. It was not until Mr. Reagan came in when he ordered a stop to it: "Stay where you are, and if you get shot at, shoot back." That's what happened here last month. That was generally the orders at that time. But during the Carter Administration, see, they put out orders that if you see the Libyans coming, run away.

G: Do you see some parallels between what happened in Libya the other day and--?

M: You're damn right. I mean, it's the same business of exercising your right of freedom of the seas, I don't give a damn where you are.

G: I gather that was one of the major considerations at CINCPAC, was it not, when the first incident occurred?

M: What was that?

G: That we had to maintain our doctrine of freedom of the seas.

M: Of course, and as a matter of fact, we had had an incident previous to that, off of Petropavlovsk, when a destroyer captain did in fact turn away, and we gave him hell about it, told him he was never to do that again.

G: Among the many controversies was the one over who initiated hostilities. The Maddox, of course, was reported to have fired warning

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shots, I believe that's correct. Some authorities have said, "Well, now, wait a minute. There's no such thing as a warning shot on the high seas. When a man-of-war shoots at another man-of-war, that's the initiation of hostilities."

M: Well, whoever said that doesn't know a goddamn thing about what they're talking about. You've heard all your life a figure of speech: you fire a shot across the bow. I mean that's been a naval custom, or at least a naval option, ever since they've had ships.

G: Well, the authority I'm citing, and I don't know how much this person knows, says that that's valid when you're accosting a noncombatant, a merchant vessel or whatever, but that when one warship fires a shot in the general direction of another, standing orders usually are, "You shoot back."

M: Well, having the information that the North Vietnamese, you know, had issued instructions to make war, I think the Maddox was acting with perhaps extreme prudence when they fired a shot with intent not to hit.

G: Did they in fact intend not to hit? I've heard cited some quotation from the gunnery officer, I believe, who said, oh, no, it was shoot to kill.

M: Let me just start by saying that it's something like you see an automobile accident, and you get all the people that saw it and ask them to tell you what happened. And every one of them has got a different story. There's nothing as confusing as to try to unravel a description of a night action at sea. There you can see things in--

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G: Of course, the first attack was a day action, the second was--

M: --was at night. The point is that the torpedo boats were well clear of the coast, and we had bullets taken out of the Maddox, so there wasn't any question about that they shot at the Maddox.

G: How did you evaluate the performance of the Maddox and its supporting aircraft at the end of the first incident? I have heard that some high officials were very dissatisfied with the fact that we didn't sink all three of those PT boats.

M: Well, I think that you are always dissatisfied if you don't sink all three, or whatever, all targets. Let me just tell you this. It's very easy to be a Monday morning quarterback on events like this. I was at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked, and there's no shock greater from an individual to shift into a shooting war at the pop of your fingers. I don't give a damn who you are, it's a very traumatic exercise for a captain of a ship or anybody else. Obviously, you're not going to have in every case, unless you've been in a state of very high tension for years, perfect performance. There's no question about the fact that under different circumstances they probably would have sunk all three of them.

G: The Maddox had a pretty high gunnery rating, didn't it?

M: Yes.

G: I've come across that someplace.

Did you get any feedback as to how officials in Washington reacted to the first attack, or did that stop at CINCPAC, or did that filter down to you?

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M: Actually that was our problem. We got too much feedback, because McNamara stepped in, and--don't forget that here you had this small destroyer with two communications officers, both of them young, inexperienced ensigns, and they had considerable difficulty getting off a report, because Washington was absolutely saturating the communications lines asking questions. They would ask a question which the ship had to receive and decode, and then before Jesus himself could write the answer, they'd ask the question over again. You just had bing-bing-bing-bing; they were asking questions as if they were sitting like you are asking me questions.

G: Were you monitoring all this cable traffic?

M: Sure. But I couldn't answer the questions until I asked them; they were the only ones on the scene. They should have left them alone and let them put it all together and then sent in a report. But of course McNamara during the Cuban Missile Crisis wanted to talk to the destroyer on the telephone, and asked the captain what expression did the Russian captain of the merchant ship have when he made him turn around and go back to Russia. He wanted to know how he looked; was he mad; was he happy? So it was that kind of approach to the operation that people--to answer your question specifically, they just went wild. "They" being the people in Washington, of course.

G: Of course. The second incident seems to have generated more controversy than the first, almost immediately. I know this is hard to do after so long an interval, but can you recall what your impressions

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were when the second incident began to unfold? It seems to have been a very confusing--

M: Well, it was at night. It was confusing. But in the meantime, of course, there were aircraft allocated to supporting the Maddox. The decision was made to carry out the mission, to continue the mission. So then we had the second attack. Which was real, as a matter of fact. Of course, we had an investigation conducted by Admiral Roy Johnson, who was commander of the Seventh Fleet, and [he] established the fact that definitely there was a second attack. The people who don't believe there was a second attack were simply using this as a means of attacking the administration and the Defense Department for provoking a war unnecessarily. That's what was going on, and of course the North Vietnamese were helping them all they could, and the media was always quoting the North Vietnamese instead of us.

So the second incident occurred, and it was a night action, which as I told you is very, very confusing under any circumstances. I've been in night actions, the Battle of the Java Sea, for instance, way back in 1942, where the Houston was sunk and several of the Dutch ships were sunk and the British ships sunk and so on down there when the Japanese captured what at that time was called the Dutch East Indies. I'm telling you, you talk about confusion, you got it in a night action. So it wasn't until the end of the war when we got the Japanese operation reports, and our own operation reports, and reports from people that were on the beach, and so on, and tried to reconstruct the thing. But I defy anybody to answer positively and emphatically,

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without fear of contradiction or speculation, every question you could ask about a night action at sea.

G: Didn't Commodore Herrick at one point send a cable saying, in essence, "Don't do anything yet, because I think that a lot of these sonar reports are either our own propeller noise" or whatever during the second action?

M: I think at the outset he said he was going to further confirm the first information he'd sent out, that he had detected the presence of these enemy ships. But you see, one of the things that was occurring then was that at that time a secret was a secret. In other words, particularly the communications in the military forces was so secret that very few people were aware of the whole system. Now, after we've had people like [Frank] Church attacking the CIA and so on, there's no secret in Washington. But in those days, questions were not answered because if they were answered they would reveal that we were reading the traffic of the North Vietnamese, which we didn't want them to know, because the minute you do that, they'll change the code.

G: Is that the impeccable and highly secret source that Mr. McNamara referred to?

M: Sure.

G: Okay. It was intercepted radio traffic, is that the nature of the thing?

M: Yes. But the press, you know, they almost ruined us in World War II. There was a big article in the--if it hadn't have been for that technique, we wouldn't have won the Battle of Midway, which was the

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turning point of World War II. But the press wants to put out in the paper and tell everybody about it, and the Chicago Tribune did, and they damn near got their ass in jail. And they should've. But all the questions from the Congress, all the questions from the media, the answers sometimes are well known, but they are given in an evasive way because they don't want to relate them to very vital aspects of our security.

G: In such cases, isn't it often the technique to go into executive session before a very select subcommittee of the Senate or the Congress and explain this sort of thing on the basis that you can expect them to keep it quiet?

M: In those days only the chairman of the committee was aware of it.

G: I see.

M: They never told the members of the committee. It was that secret. Now they just print it in the Washington Post. And we are going to suffer from it, and a lot of American boys are going to die from that.

G: Some people have suggested that perhaps a formal, full-dress board of inquiry should have been conducted about the second one, and I think they say that there was a board of inquiry after a similar incident the next month, in September, I believe it was September 18, involving two other destroyers, which turned out to be--

M: I don't recall that. We had a directive from Washington to conduct a thorough investigation, and I assigned Vice Admiral Roy Johnson to do it, and he conducted it, I think, in a thorough manner and turned in a report, item by item, and concluded that there was, in fact, a bona

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fide attack by the North Vietnamese. But, you know, you're never going to tell the press everything about it; you can't do it when you're at war. In the Vietnam War they wanted you to give them the operation order before you launched the attack. They don't give a damn how many American boys get killed; that's all right, we've got to have that for the headlines. They would demand, "What time are you going to initiate the attack? How many men are in the attack? Where are you going to shoot first?" And they ask you all kinds of questions like that, and the instant you answer them, of course, the enemy knows them and you might as well not do the operation.

So during the entire Vietnam War, there were many, many speculations and efforts on the part of the media to fill in gaps that they couldn't find out otherwise. You know, they'd put in their own idea what happened and then pretty soon it became the accepted answer. It was just like during the Christmas bombing when we got the POWs back, the North Vietnamese announced we were killing our own POWs. And of course, I got many telephone calls from their mothers and fathers and wives and sisters and brothers and children of these boys, and I tried to get the newspapers not to publish this. But they had big headlines that we were killing our own boys. Well, they all came back; we didn't touch a one of them; we knew where they all were. But the media was in a frame of mind where they would believe the North Vietnamese before they'd believe us. And they'd publish what the North--they were just helping them out. If the North Vietnamese had hired a

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public relations firm to do what our own media did for them, it would have cost them forty-six billion dollars or more.

G: Why do you pick that figure?

M: Oh, I was just--

G: All right. I thought maybe you were referring to forty-six billion that was meaningful in some way.

Operation Pierce Arrow was, I think, the title given to the reprisal, although I think reprisal was not a word that could be used at the time, because of the things it connoted.

M: Well, it was a retaliation.

G: Were you satisfied with that operation?

M: Well, no, because you had limitations on it, and of course it was designed in Washington, again, for political reasons. I mean, the logic behind that operation was that since these were torpedo boats and since they're burning fuel that we would only attack the base of the boats. So we attacked at Vinh the fuel storage, the barracks where the crews supposedly lived, and the dock space where the boats tied up. In general, that was the plan. As a matter of fact, that was generally the kind of thinking that followed through in the whole war. They would always try to relate--for instance, when the North Vietnamese blew up the hotel at Pleiku, and that was the first time we really had--I think we had nine Americans killed there--the retaliation was to bomb barracks. Because they bombed our barracks, we would bomb their barracks, you know, kind of a tit-for-tat, which is a lot of nonsense in the military game.

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G: Now, there's a break in your service as regards Vietnam about this time, isn't there, and you go over to the Atlantic?

M: Yes, I went over to the Atlantic in 1965, but of course at that time we began to provide our share of ships to the [war]. The Atlantic Fleet began to supply as many ships to the Vietnam War as the Pacific Fleet, and therefore I had to follow it very closely.

G. Were you involved in the early planning and execution of the Rolling Thunder campaign when it began in 1965?

M: Yes.

G: I've heard it suggested that coordination was something of a problem there, because you had so many services from so many directions involved, working out routes and altitudes, time schedules, and so on. Who coordinated between air force and navy and South Vietnamese and so on?

M: Well, the Commander in Chief, Pacific, I guess, in a broad sense coordinated, and then we had in the navy what was called Task Force 77 dealing with the coordination headquarters in Saigon. I guess [William] Westmoreland was down there by then, Westmoreland's command. Of course, I don't give a damn, when you have a war involving that many aircraft, and let's say you were launching British and American, you'd have to have coordination. You're launching from the sea and from the land, you have to have coordination. If you're exchanging intelligence information, or for instance, we used our cruisers to direct the air force aircraft, to tell them when the North Vietnamese fighters were

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on their tail and things like that. So you don't organize something like that overnight and obviously it's not an easy job.

G: Sir, were you aware of the debate in the administration over the strategy involved in the bombing, the concept of gradualism, I think some people have called it, where--

(Interruption)

Sir, we had just finished talking about, or you had made one comment about, the concept of gradualism in the bombing.

M: Oh, yes. Yes. Well, of course at one time General Maxwell Taylor wrote a book entitled The Uncertain Trumpet, and his theme was the idea of what was called controlled response, which I guess is another way of describing what some people call gradualism. The idea, of course, that they had was to force the North Vietnamese to negotiate by convincing them or sending them the message that "If you don't like this, more is coming; but we don't want to hurt you too bad, so we just are going kind of to nick the edges for a while," in the hopes that they would get the message. Of course the problem was that they never got the message, because they were professional revolutionaries. You have to bear in mind that Ho Chi Minh and his crowd fought the French before World War II, then the Japanese came in and they fought the Japanese, then the French came back and they fought the French again, and then the Americans came in and they fought the Americans. In other words, they had been professional revolutionaries for a couple of decades, and they weren't going to give up.

G: Endurance is rather amazing, I would say.

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M: So the concept of gradualism I don't think will ever work anyplace, because no opponent is ever going to conclude that he can't hold on and win if you are not really and truly hurting him.

G: What about the argument that if we had gone in a hundred per cent right from the beginning, with the view of taking out the North Vietnamese military installations and industry, that we might trigger a Chinese or a Russian response?

M: Well, of course, Mr. Johnson made a very famous [speech]--to me famous, because I thought it was a speech that had been written for him by those who gave him some very poor advice. I believe he made this speech in Houston, Texas, but nevertheless--I could look it up for you--he said three things: first, he said that we would not invade North Vietnam. Had we gone into Vinh instead of Danang at the outset, you see, it would have been very easy to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And we spent billions of dollars trying to stop the flow of supplies, not only into South Vietnam but also Cambodia through the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which came in below down at the southwest area of North Vietnam and then went down through Laos. But he said, "We will not invade North Vietnam." Well, North Vietnam was the only nation that I'm aware of that was able on that basis to deploy every division they had on the grounds that they wouldn't need them at home.

Also, I thought that kind of policy really made possible the My Lai affair, because the young officers, both those in the Marine Corps and the army, that were fighting on the ground had an almost impossible assignment. They were continually admonished, "Now, don't kill any of

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the South Vietnamese." But what happened was that the Viet Cong as well as the North Vietnamese looked exactly like their friends, and that meant that you had women carrying hand grenades in their bras-sieres and in their babies' diapers and so on, and then when Lieutenant [William] Calley shot up a few of them, everybody was horrified. As a matter of fact, I was down there one time when these two marines were trying to teach kids how to play volleyball, and an eight-year-old kid pulled out a hand grenade and killed them both. So had we gone into North Vietnam, there wouldn't have been any question about who was the enemy. Every Oriental you saw was enemy, you see, you didn't have to wait and undress them to find out.

A second point was that we were fighting them, in my opinion, on their own terms, by just essentially waiting for them to come down into South Vietnam. So I thought that was a mistake. In other words, the first thing Mr. Johnson said, "We will not invade North Vietnam." The next thing he said was, "We will not overthrow Ho Chi Minh." That again was part of this--I'm telling you this because it's related to gradualism, you see. We were trying to reassure them that we are not going to treat you so rough; just let's negotiate and get this thing over with. In other words, it was an effort to substitute negotiation for fighting, which is a noble objective but it never works, as obviously it didn't. The only reason one goes to war is to overthrow a government that is doing something you don't like. That's the only reason. You don't have a war to promote generals and bomb airfields and sink ships; you go to war for just one single purpose, and that's

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to remove a government that's doing something you don't like. In other words, we went into World War II to throw out Hitler because we didn't like what he was doing. You just can put your finger on any war that's ever taken place and that was what caused the war. But in this war we weren't going to do that. We weren't going to overthrow Ho Chi Minh.

Then the third thing gets back to your question--this is a round-about way of answering your question--he said, "We seek no wider war." This was to pacify the Chinese and the Russians. I kept trying to tell the people here that in the first place the Russians had no vital interests in Vietnam. They were very content with the fact that they were spending a billion dollars a year and we were spending twenty-six billion dollars a year; they didn't care whether the war ever ended, because that was like a bargain basement for them in the political arena. So far as the Chinese were concerned, the Chinese used to be in Vietnam, and it took the Vietnamese years and years to get them out, so the one people, the one country that didn't want the Chinese in Vietnam were the Vietnamese. As a matter of fact, no sooner had we left than they started fighting each other.

So the idea of the Chinese coming into Vietnam was a lot of nonsense; it was just about as far from their industrial base as you can get; it's all the way across China from the only heavy industry they had. They had one fly-by-night railroad coming down there. The Chinese weren't coming in there. For instance, because of the policy that we seek no wider war, we were not allowed to bomb the Phuc Yen

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airfield during the entire war, which is the field right outside Hanoi. The reason was that the Chinese courier came in, I think, on Tuesday, and the Russian courier came in on Thursday, and they said, "Oh, God, suppose we shoot down a Russian. Oh, hell, it just would be terrible to shoot down a Chinese." So we're not going to shoot down anybody there. This meant that--the North Vietnamese weren't idiots; they took their best airplanes and put them in that field, and we never could attack them until they took off and got their wheels up, when we could have strafed them on the ground and cleaned them out.

G: You say that's the Phuc Yen airfield?

M: Yes. P-H-U-C Y-E-N. That's where the POWs were flown out, that field.

All this is related to the question that you asked me, would the Chinese come in or would the Russians come in? That caused the United States government to impose so many restraints on our policy that a lot of American boys were killed because the rules of engagement were designed to prevent offending the Russians and the Chinese, not the North Vietnamese. You get the point?

G: Yes, sir.

M: For instance, we had cruisers with Talos missiles that could fire a hundred miles. We could have put a couple of those cruisers off of Haiphong harbor and every time an airplane took off from North Vietnam, we could have knocked him off. But they said, "No, God, you can't do that; it may be a Chinese plane. You can't identify it; it may be a Russian plane." The same way in air combat. Pilots were not allowed

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to shoot when they could; you know, you have a missile with a ten-mile range or something, and you get a target--they had to go up and identify the airplane to make certain they weren't shooting down a Russian or a Chinese. So this fear, this constant fear, which I thought was artificial, that the Chinese or the Russians were going to get into the war, hamstrung us and tied our hands politically. I mean the politicians just couldn't bear the thought.

G: There's an alternate argument; I want to see if this was a relevant argument at the time or if you encountered it, which was that the North Vietnamese targets were more valuable as hostages than they would be if they were destroyed. That is, if we destroyed them all, we had lost some bargaining points.

M: That was a lot of nonsense. Just like, you know, they could rationalize anything, but unfortunately, war doesn't lend itself to that kind of logic. That's a lot of nonsense.

G: Now if I have my dates right, you became chief of naval operations in the summer of 1967, is that correct?

M: Yes.

G: Were the disputes still going on about the bombing at that time?

M: Yes. In fact, they had what was called the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee. It was holding hearings when I arrived in Washington, and my first testimony as CNO was in connection with the bombing.

G: Did all of the Joint Chiefs testify before this subcommittee?

M: Yes, every one of them. As did Admiral [Ulysses S. Grant] Sharp, who was CINCPAC, and some other general; Westmoreland I think also testified.

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G: And was it that time that Secretary McNamara testified and seemed, at least, to dispute some of the testimony of the Joint Chiefs about the effectiveness of the bombing, what the bombing could do?

M: Yes.

G: What was your reaction to that?

M: Well, I thought that McNamara didn't know what the hell he was talking about, because they were claiming that the bombing wasn't effective, see. They'd always stop the bombing--President Johnson stopped the bombing one week before the election in 1968, remember that?

G: Yes, sir.

M: And that's when Nixon came in; he was running against Humphrey. But my point was that if the bombing was so ineffective, why is it the North Vietnamese always want us to stop the bombing but they never do want to stop the ground fighting? Because they knew that the ground fighting was going to bleed us white and the bombing wasn't hurting them that much. Then why wasn't it? The argument was made that you were not stopping the supply of troops down into [South Vietnam]. And they even had studies saying they only need three and a half pounds a day or something like that, and they'd multiply that by the number of troops, and then they'd finally come up with the tonnage and so on, and they could show that with four wheelbarrows, or something like that, they could fight for a month, you see. Well, that's not the way it was; the point was that there were two railroads coming into Hanoi with supplies from Russia and China. One came from the northeast and one from the northwest. But the hooker was that we were not allowed

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to mine Haiphong harbor. So the bulk of the supplies were coming in by ship, that supported not just the war, but there was a matter of supporting the population. If the population wasn't supported, the population couldn't support the war.

So the net effect of that was that although we were allowed to bomb the railroads, they put a thirty-mile sanctuary, or a thirty-mile zone on China. We couldn't come within thirty miles of China, and we couldn't come within ten miles of Hanoi. So it's only seventy miles from the Chinese border to the city of Hanoi. If you put ten miles around Hanoi and thirty miles off of China, that's forty miles, and you only had thirty miles to attack them. They only ran the trains at night, and they'd hide in the tunnels in the daytime and dash across that thirty-mile thing. Now, when Nixon finally mined Haiphong and completely and totally shut off any kind of supply from the sea, then they had to run those damn railroads night and day, and we knocked the hell out of them. The point is, when you are going to attack a transportation system, you've got to attack the highways, the seaways, and the railroads, all three at once. You can't leave one of them open. They ran the whole damn war up until May 8, 1972 by ship, and it wasn't uncommon at all to find ships from Somalia, from Russia, from Red China, even from England, in Haiphong harbor. But once we mined it, not one ship entered the harbor and not one ship left until we took the mines out ourselves two years later.

G: Admiral, you make it admirably lucid, and yet there was no agreement. I know that there were arguments that mining Haiphong is not going to

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make any difference, that they'll just lighter the stuff in from offshore.

M: Oh, yes, but you know you'll always get arguments like that, but every one of them was false. That fear of Russia that you mentioned a while ago persisted. I'll tell you a story about this. I had a hell of a time getting them--and I'll always thank Mr. Nixon for having the guts to do this, contrary to the advice of everybody else--to mine this harbor. He called me in and asked me how long it would take me to make plans. This was on about May 1, 1972. I told him it would take me about three seconds, because I had made the plans when I was commander of the Seventh Fleet in 1964. And we did, we did exactly the same plans that had been sitting there all that time.

G: Is it correct that--I think I can cite a cable requesting a hundred Mark 50 mines be sent from Subic Bay.

M: Yes, that's where they kept them. He wanted to know if I could do it without it being leaked. I told him that only the navy could do that, because I already knew what ship was going to do it, and if there were any reporters on that ship, we wouldn't let them go ashore, and if any reporters were supposed to come out we wouldn't let them come, so there was no way of knowing it. He wanted to go on TV at nine o'clock at night, which was nine o'clock in the morning in Saigon, and announce the the mines were falling. Which he did, and it didn't leak.

But after we dropped the mines, two little minesweepers from Vladivostok left port and headed south. And you would have thought, from these guys that kept saying just what you asked me a while ago

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about what are the Russians going to do, that the Battle of Jutland was about to begin. These things weren't much longer than this room. I said, "These minesweepers--in the first place, they can't sweep the mines." You know, they said they were going to rush up into Tonkin Gulf and sweep the mines. I said, "They can't sweep the mines. Those things are really bitches to sweep. They can't sweep those mines. But secondly, they don't have the slightest idea of going to Tonkin Gulf." And they said, "Well, where are they going?" I said, "They are going to Chittagong." When the India-Pakistan War--that was East Pakistan, and the Pakistanis mined it. These are old, anchored mines, you know, old-fashioned mines, so they were going up there and sweep those mines. They were not going to Haiphong. Sure enough, when they got down abreast of the Tonkin Gulf, they never even looked that way, just kept right on going to Chittagong. So all those fears of what the Russians would do, or all those fears of what the Chinese would do, were a lot of nonsense. But they couldn't get away from that "we seek no wider war."

G: In your opinion, what was the effect of the mining of Haiphong? Did it work pretty much as you'd hoped it would?

M: You're damned right. It absolutely brought them to the--it was a major part of making them agree to turn the POWs loose. Plus the bombing we did at Christmas. That was the beginning of their logistics failure. Because when you bring all those ships in, you see, with twenty thousand tons of supplies--for instance, the North Vietnamese realized what was happening, and there were several--we

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set the mines so that they could have three days to get out. We notified them. You know, you have to put out notice to mariners, and so on, so that they could leave within three days. As long as they left within three days, the mines were safe. The North Vietnamese took all their pilots and ran them up the Red River so they couldn't leave.

G: How did we know that?

M: We've got ways of knowing it. So those that wanted to run away weren't allowed to. Because many of those ships were only 5 per cent unloaded, or something like that, and they wanted all the supplies out, so not a damn one of them was allowed to leave.

G: How many of them were trapped then?

M: Twenty some-odd, I think. Twenty-six, or something like that.

G: Various countries involved?

M: Yes. Then after that, ships from various countries like Russia, what they did was take all the crew off and fly them out and put in caretakers in the ships.

G: I see.

M: But you see, we should have done that in 1965 right after the Tonkin Gulf. Incidentally, not one human was killed in this operation, neither enemy nor friend. I mean, it was perfectly safe; they were always worrying about killing people, we didn't kill anybody. And stopped the thing cold.

G: We didn't lose anybody either?

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M: We didn't lose anybody; at that time we were flying a thousand sorties a day, and we only took twenty-six sorties out of a thousand, and the planes were gone for an hour and a half and it was all over, and not one ship ever entered that harbor again the rest of the war. Not one got out until we let them out.

G: Do you have to reseed ever in an operation like that?

M: Yes, we reseeded a couple of times, but that was just as a safety measure; there was no effort made on their part to sweep or to escape.

G: How difficult an operation was it for us to go in and take them out then later on?

M: Oh, that's not easy. Of course, the minesweeping technique is the kind of thing that the budgeteers are always attacking, because it's not very spectacular and it's not very appealing and so on; it's hard, highly technical work. That's a big weakness in our system today. Of course, right after that we had the Yom Kippur War and had to sweep the mines out of the Suez Canal with the same people. No sooner had we finished with Haiphong than we had to run over to Suez.

G: Is that rather nerve-wracking, that kind of job?

M: Yes, it's nerve-wracking, because you don't know when a mine is going to go off under you. But on the other hand, they do a lot of it with helicopters now and that's fairly safe.

G: That's interesting. I won't pursue that, because I think we're getting sensitive.

What methods did we have of evaluating the effectiveness of the bombing? Did we rely on air reconnaissance pretty much?

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M: We relied on air reconnaissance. In the first place, again getting back to your question about fear of the Russians and so on, the North Vietnamese began to put in the surface-to-air missiles. The way they installed usually was in a circle. So I was commander of the Pacific Fleet then and I sent in for permission to knock them out.

G: This would have been in 1964?

M: No, 1965. They had a man that was advising McNamara on just about everything, named [John T.] McNaughton. He was going to be secretary of the navy and he was killed in a commercial airplane accident in Tennessee. He was going to be secretary of the navy, coming in at about the same time I was coming in as CNO. In fact, he'd already written me and said that he was looking forward to seeing me and so on. But anyway, he wrote the message back and said that the North Vietnamese are not going to shoot at you, that they're just putting those there as a deterrent, and that if they ever shoot at you then we'll let you attack them. Well, by the time they shot at us they had put in several installations. We could've made certain that they never had one; we could've knocked them out just as fast as they built them. There again we'd have saved I don't know how many boys' lives. But they wouldn't let us do that on the grounds that they really weren't going to shoot at you; they just want to scare you. So there again there were so many restraints put on the military operation that we wound up losing fifty thousand plus dead, and you multiply that by three, one hundred and fifty thousand wounded. The war went on from

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1964 until January 1973, and it should never have happened. It should have been--you could have stopped it in less than a year.

G: It sounds like you're saying that this affected service morale a good deal.

M: It affected service morale tremendously, for two [reasons]: as I mentioned to you, the serious difficulty that the young lieutenants had that were out on the front in the damn jungle, and secondly, we had a policy, which I thought was absolutely disastrous, called college deferments, which said in effect that if your family is rich enough to send you to college, you don't have to fight for your country. That was, I think, the originator of all the riots on the campuses, and the Berkeley nonsense, and the running off to Canada, and stuff like that. What's worse, then they started having a one-year rotation. No unit was ever able to organize itself into a homogeneous organization, because they didn't even know each other. They were coming and going all the time. People ask me what lessons did you learn in the Vietnam War, and I say we didn't learn anything that I didn't already know, but we just never carried them out.

G: I'm going to get you to comment a little more at length, I hope, when we wind this one up.

Admiral, you stop whenever you think you have to, now.

M: Well, I can go another ten minutes or so.

G: All right. What special problems did the Tet offensive pose for the navy, if any?

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M: I don't think the Tet offensive posed any particular problems for the navy. The key aspect of the Tet offensive was that it was--I think perhaps Westmoreland may have, in a way, by the manner in which he asked for reinforcements, caused people to think that it was a great defeat, when in fact it was quite a defeat for the North Vietnamese when you get right down to it. You know, they are not very closely coordinated, and many of them--you see, the thing from their point of view, they were going to make a large-scale frontal attack, and then they were going to follow up, and the follow-up troops never got the word that the front line had been mauled pretty heavily and so they just walked right into ambush after ambush. The Tet offensive was more of a political and public relations problem than it was a military problem.

G: I know a lot of people that agree with that.

Can you recall your reaction to the March 31 [1968] speech, when President Johnson made his famous announcements limiting the bombing and that he would not run again?

M: "I seek no wider war"--no, he said, "I will not seek and I will not accept"--

G: Right.

M: Many people don't realize it, but President Johnson was harassed and criticized and pressured to the same degree, if not even worse, than Mr. Nixon was right before he resigned. I mean, one time he called me up early in the morning, Saturday morning, and said he wanted to spend a weekend at sea--he wanted to get out where people couldn't telephone

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him, I think--in the Pacific Ocean, and here he was sitting in Washington. "On an aircraft carrier," he says. Well, that was kind of a big order, but I called the captain of the Constellation, and the only thing that saved me was it was five o'clock in California and eight o'clock here. So I told him to get under way and go up by San Clemente and wait for further orders. Well, we get in there before one and we fly out there. Of course by the time we got out there, all the reporters knew that he was coming, and they were there to meet him, and they started to ask him all these questions. He had asked me to put in his cabin three TV sets so he could look at the news, all three of them at once: ABC, NBC, CBS. Which he did often, as you've probably heard. He'd listen to the thing, and he'd turn to me and he'd say, "I didn't say that, did I?" And he didn't, you know. They were just quoting him out of context; they were misquoting him. You know, it was a sorry performance, but it was not the first one that I saw them put on during that war. They were fully qualified to do so.

But later on we were walking around the flight deck, and I asked him, "Who do you think is behind all this business of laying on so much unfair criticism on you and so on?" He said, "Bobby's [Kennedy] out to get me." And of course, I'd been asked before, did I know President Johnson and would I comment on him, and I said, "Well, he just made one mistake." And of course people perk up their ears when I say that, and they say "What's that?" I say, "Well, when he came back to the White House after President Kennedy was assassinated and walked into the White House for the first time, he should have fired everything

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that moved, including the cat. And then he would have made out much better." (Laughter) Because he just, in effect, in an effort to I think calm the public and carry on and make everybody think that everything was rolling right along and business as usual, he kept all those people and they were not loyal to him. Most presidents when they come in, they wind up with a group fairly loyal to them. But that was not the case and that was one of his problems. That was before he made the speech we're talking about, but they didn't know he was going to make the speech, so they were going to make certain that they had a good competitor in Bobby.

G: Do you remember where you were when the March 31 speech went out over the air?

M: That was the thirty-first, 196--?

G: 1968.

M: 1968. Yes. Well, yes, I was in the Pentagon, I think, or I was here in Washington.

G: It's been my experience, asking people, that a surprising number of them seem to have had a sort of Pearl Harbor experience; they can all remember exactly where they were and what they were doing.

M: No, I don't exactly know where I was.

G: You don't remember that? Were you surprised?

M: To a degree, yes. But at the same time I was fully aware of the--you know, the country was in a state of near anarchy. You had people throwing rocks through the Justice Department building, and lying down in front of automobiles down here on Pennsylvania Avenue, and pouring

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big buckets of pig blood on the Pentagon steps, and, hell, they were coming from all over the country. You had an organized effort from the headquarters at Berkeley, at the University of California in Berkeley, trying to undermine the morale of all the young recruits at the various army bases, and it was a hell of a situation.

G: One of the things, of course, that came from the March 31 speech was a new restriction on the bombing down to the twentieth parallel, I believe it was, and then maybe later it was the nineteenth. I've heard from various sources two radically different opinions about what that did to the bombing. One said, of course, that it greatly limited what you could do. The other source said, well, it was much better because we were able to concentrate more, especially on the infiltration routes. What is your feeling about that?

M: My feeling was that there was no difference between twenty and nineteen when you get right down to it. The idea of being able to concentrate more, that's a lot of nonsense, because the forces on the spot were so large that you were only using a very small percentage of them as it was, so it didn't make any difference. See, it was a matter of concentrating in that kind of terrain. The only place that it made any sense, really, when you get right down to it, was to go for the jugular at Hanoi and Haiphong and the railroads, and block the transportation and so on up further north. What we were trying to do was to knock out the supplies. I tell you, I've set forth this analogy, namely that suppose you have this big chain grocery store. I don't know what the big store in Dallas is these days, or in Austin, but

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let's say you had the Atlantic-Pacific grocery store. All the wives come in and they fill up their little baskets and they go out to their cars and they drive anywhere from five to ten miles away, and they very carefully put those groceries up on their shelves. After that was all over, then we set about to destroy all these groceries. It would have been so much easier to knock off the store to start off with. That's exactly what happened in the bombing in Vietnam. You were bombing five dollars worth of rice with a five hundred-dollar bomb. Whereas with the same bomb you could have bombed five thousand dollars worth of rice.

G: Do you think General [Curtis] LeMay was right when he said, "We are swatting flies when we ought to go after the dunghill"?

M: Of course he was right. You should never get into a war, you know, if you don't end it as fast as you can. I don't give a damn what kind of war. This business of controlled response--and of course, this thing of moving the bombing line up and down, that was again to get a message to [Ho Chi Minh]. I asked them one time what the hell they thought they were doing by message, and do you know what they said? "Well, we're just sending a message to Ho Chi Minh." Well, Ho Chi Minh never got the message, because there was no way he was going to accept the message. That was total and utter nonsense, this business of trying to move the line. Then in addition to that they posed two other restraints, namely for a long time they wouldn't let us use napalm, and then the other thing they wouldn't let us do, they restricted the number of airplanes. They'd say, "You can't go above the twentieth

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and do fifty sorties." Well, when the weather was good, you should have been allowed to do five hundred sorties instead of [fifty]. They just assumed that weather conditions were always the same, like bombing in a desert, which is not the case down there; the visibility is very bad.

Then they turned around and said that bombing was not effective. The bombing was very effective when it was used right. Look what happened Christmas of 1972; they couldn't wait to turn the POWs loose. Where Nixon made his mistake there is he stopped the bombing. They only bombed nine days, and he stopped it. He stopped it because of the big hue and cry here in this country. Papers were saying we were bombing hospitals; we never bombed any hospitals. Every cabinet member was jumping all over Nixon, every congressman. There was only one congressman that supported him and that was Eddie Hébert from Louisiana. He's dead now, but he was chairman of the Armed Services Committee. We didn't lose a single airplane the last two days.

G: You mentioned napalm, and that brought up another point I wanted to inquire into, and that was the charges that some journalists made, I think notable among them was Harrison Salisbury, that we were bombing indiscriminately, that we were using antipersonnel weapons against civilian targets and so on. How did you react to that?

M: That's the typical report. Obviously they'd always want to know, every time you'd plan a bombing attack up there, how many civilians are you going to kill? You don't have the slightest idea how many civilians you are going to kill. If you were bombing an air base,

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maybe they're having a picnic that day. Or maybe they've got everybody lined up for a change of command or something like that. It was interesting that during this war, the press as well as the civilian managers of the war seemed to be more concerned about the jeopardy of the enemy than they did the jeopardy of their own American boys that were flying the airplanes. That was why they put all these restraints on the way they would fly, what kind of weapons they were supposed to use, and when they were supposed to bomb, and where they were supposed to bomb, et cetera, et cetera.

So there was never any intentional targeting of civilians. This Salisbury [account] was just a damned lie. Obviously, though, when you drop a bomb with a damage radius, if there happen to be any civilians around, if you were to bomb, say, Kelly Field, I think there are twelve thousand civilians that work out there, something like that--

G: I think when my dad was out there, they had twenty thousand.

M: Well, whatever, so I mean that obviously you are going to kill some civilians in a war. I don't care if you shell it with artillery, the same thing is going to happen. So that was another point that kept coming up in this war, about killing civilians. And Senator Kennedy was very vocal on this subject, as if you could fight a war and never hurt any civilians. As a matter of fact, that's what screwed up the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. They wouldn't permit them to bomb the Cuban air force in Havana because you might kill some civilians, because the civilian airplanes were in the same airfield, and that blew the whole thing. So there's a trend of thought in this country among some

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circles that you can fight a war and never touch a civilian, you know, which is just total--it's stupid.

G: What were the usual causes, do you think, for the occurrences where a bomb obviously did hit in a civilian locale?

M: When you take a B-52, for instance, or you take an F-4, which can carry eighteen bombs, traveling at six hundred miles an hour, and you got all these little mechanical devices that must function, and one of them hangs up and the bomb goes another two miles--I mean, it's only got to hang up a second and it's someplace else. You are never going to be able to eliminate that, I don't give a damn what you do.

G: Okay, one other question related to that and then I'll leave it: the charges about using the antipersonnel-type weapons, such as, I think, Lazy Dog and--

M: Of course we used antipersonnel weapons against the military personnel. What did they want us to drop, cream puffs? (Laughter)

G: I'm sure not. I was wondering if the story that the North Vietnamese made a habit of putting antiaircraft positions in villages, for example, would sometimes account for the fact that a Lazy Dog weapon would be used?

M: Of course. As a matter of fact, during the Christmas bombing of 1972, their whole missile assembly was right downtown Hanoi, knowing full well that they thought we had that restriction. We had a hell of a time getting permission to attack it, on the same grounds: you might kill some civilians. Here's a whole goddamn big city; obviously civilians live in the city. But the civilians are also sitting there

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assembling the missiles. If you'd followed this line of thought, you would not ever make any effort to destroy the missiles until they got about a hundred feet from the airplane. Then you try to destroy it. It's that kind of logic that drives you up the wall.

G: Did any reporters ever ask to fly missions over the North?

M: No.

G: They never did?

M: Not that I know of.

G: They did in World War II, didn't they, fairly common?

M: Oh, yes, sure. That brings up a story: they were always quoting a major. "A" major. I called him the ubiquitous major, because they would say, "A major saw. . . ." So when we went into Laos in what they called Lam Son 719, this reporter reported that a major had told him that he had seen a helicopter unload several bodies of American troops. Of course the rules were American troops weren't supposed to go into Laos. So this immediately made the government out as a liar, because they brought bodies back. So Nixon called me up and said, "I want you to find that major and court-martial him before dark." I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. President." Of course, there was no major. I mean, this guy was probably in a bar making up this story. The next day, the major would be way down in the southern part of the Mekong River about six hundred miles away, and "A major reported so and so." So Nixon would come up and say, "Now, you find that major and court-martial him."

G: Why was it always a major, do you suppose?

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- M: I don't know, but they liked the idea of it being a major.
- G: A field grade officer, that makes it more authoritative.
- M: Yes. Yes. So the major was covering a hell of a lot of ground, and of course I'd tell the President we'd take care of it, but the whole point was it was nobody, you see, they were just making it up.
- G: You remember any reporters that you thought were especially good? Any reporters that covered the war well?
- M: In general, rather than reporters, I think that some of the magazines, like U.S. News and World Report was fair and factual. But those that represented newspapers, and particularly the New York Times and those that came from other countries, since none of our allies supported us in this, had absolutely no integrity or credibility at all so far as I'm concerned.
- G: In retrospect, if you had it to do over, looking back with all the advantages of hindsight that you don't have at the time, would you do anything differently?
- M: Me? No. No. No, I did everything I could, and I gave my opinion to the best of my ability. I don't know what else I could have done when you had that kind of civilian running the government. No, I don't know what I could have done differently. I've been asked that question many times. You can say, "Well, why didn't you resign?" Well, that wouldn't have done any good, because then they would have put somebody in your place that did exactly what they wanted them to do. I think I did an awful lot to get the POWs back. I'm not sure my replacement would have done that. If it hadn't been for working with

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Nixon--nobody else agreed with what we did. He asked me, "What about the morality of the Christmas bombing?" and I said, "Hell, insofar as I'm concerned that's not a factor. They've been torturing these boys all this time." I said, "So far as I'm concerned I'd kill them all."

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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