INTERVIEWEE: Benjamin Read (Tape 2)

INTERVIEWER: Paige E. Mulhollan

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M: Let's take it sort of topically and start with the escalation side of it. You were there right from the very beginning; when did it become obvious from your vantage point that the Viet Nam situation was going to get a whole lot more serious?

R: Well, I guess in the summer of 1964 it first became starkly apparent that things were falling apart there at a rate which required an enormous infusion of effort to stem or even to hold what ground was left. It became more and more evident that fall that the South Vietnamese were not capable with the level of support that we had there to hold their own. And then of course at the very end of '64 after our elections and right about the time of the turn of the year, they started sending in their main force units and we were started picking up evidence of North Vietnamese regulars in the picture; and it became a very, very different ball game.

M: Was there ever serious consideration of going up strong in the early part of '64; such as we did then in the middle of '65?

R: I don't remember any dramatic recommendations of that sort. I do recall a long period of contingency studies which were done before and after the U. S. '64 elections which contemplated U. S. air strikes against the North under certain contingencies and posited various levels of response; but there wasn't, as of that point in time, anyone saying go on up there or do this, that, or the other thing. It was in the nature of contingency studies, and those plans, of course, weren't put into effect until February--after Pleiku.

M: What about the Tonkin period? Was there consideration before that in the State Department--strong recommendations to go to Congress for its authority?

R: I don't recall any really major concerted efforts to do that. It had been considered; it had been looked at; and some draft resolutions had been prepared, as I recall it, prior to the Tonkin Gulf incident. There was just a general consensus that Congress would not be willing to give this sort of endorsement, so it wasn't really something that people had on the front of their minds.

M: Why is Tonkin causing so much controversy? You're probably familiar with the current book that's out making the whole thing a matter of deceit. Was there any doubt about the facts at the time as far as where you sat?

R: Yes. As I recall it, I was on Cape Cod when the first incident occurred. So I don't recall that except by having read up when I was called back and got briefed twenty-four

hours later. The second incident looked very, very murky right from the start; the first few messages had internal inconsistencies--no one really knew the degree of reliability of what the naval units thought they'd seen. Everyone by that time was fairly well conversant with what electronic hobgoblins can do. And I recall there being a great deal of doubt about just exactly what had been approaching those destroyer units.

M: Did that mean that the advice from the Department was divided on whether or not it justified retaliation?

R: I couldn't say with accuracy now whether there was a division. I think there was a fair consensus that there had been a second incident, although there were these elements of doubt and skepticism. I think the best judgment we were able to come to at that time was rather widely shared that there had been an incident of some size, scale, or description; we didn't think it was that serious, but it did look as though if there had been a genuine threat to those naval units on a second occasion shortly after the first incident, and it was treated as such.

M: Had it already been decided that if such incidents occurred that retaliation was going to be our response?

R: No. Typically, while there was a lot of sentiment to that effect, there weren't any presealed, signed, and delivered decisions that were going to be put into effect automatically. It was looked at, again, on the merits and de-merits of the situation at the time.

M: Were the missions of those two destroyers something that had been considered at the State Department level as opposed to the Pentagon?

R: Yes. And we had serious doubts about the wisdom of sending those-- I think we called them the Tiger Patrol, I forget what the code name was, I haven't looked that up--

M: Were you naming the code things at that point already?

R: No. That was strictly naval shenanigans. But I remember for instance, talking to George Ball and the Secretary about the element of provocation in those destroyers going back up there and for what gain. Obviously there was some intelligence gain, but there was a very large element of risk, and we had serious doubts about the wisdom of the mission as well as the rules of engagement under which they operated.

M: They were close enough to the covert 34-A things to have been provocative, as far as [the North Vietnamese].

R: Well, I don't remember in terms of any ability to see ahead-- I don't remember the

juxtaposition of the two being seriously considered as it should have been. I'm sure this may have been in the minds of some people, but it wasn't in my mind. I don't have specific recollection of the two events being related as they plainly should have been with the luxury of hindsight. The concern I spoke about was the basic nature of the mission of sending destroyers way up there in the Gulf--with the known shore batteries, and the asserted twelve-mile limit, and the degree of response that this might evoke.

M: During the fall, William Bundy, I believe, had a review group going. Did you participate as part of that group?

R: No. That was at the Bureau level; I saw all the products that came out of it when they were on the way to the Secretary and to the White House, but I did not participate in it directly.

M: Was that a basic reconsideration, or was it more a tactical study?

R: I recall it more as the latter. I certainly haven't seen those papers for a long time though, and the characterization may or may not be accurate. I remember them mainly as tactical contingency papers based on the strong premise that things were unraveling badly in the South, and that there was a need for a much greater presence, and that this might involve certain obvious risks.

M: There wasn't during the fall a steady policy of tit-for-tat type retaliation on our part?

R: No.

M: The Bien Hoa bombing for example didn't provoke one. Did that provide an argument over whether there should be one, in fact?

R: What was the date of that, do you recall?

M: It was right before the American elections, something like November 2 or the 3rd--something like that, just outside of Saigon.

R: I don't recall any strong recommendations that that should have been the trigger for retaliation. I think there was something in December--I forget what the incident was, but there was a serious--

M: That was the BOQ that was bombed.

R: Yes, you're right.

M: Around the Christmas holidays.

R: I think there were on that occasion people who recommended striking somewhere north of the 17th parallel, but those recommendations didn't pass.

M: Did you have any indication during that period of the President playing a direct role in saying, "No, we're not going to do this," or--

R: I don't recall that at this time one way or the other--I have just no recollection.

M: The bombing finally started in February, as you mention--the Pleiku incident; was that one of those cases where the government sits down and goes through the political science rigmarole of making a clear decision, or did it turn out differently than that?

R: I recall it as being a decision made in haste. Secretary Rusk was in Florida for the first brief respite he'd had in many, many many months; he had flu if I recall correctly. And George Ball was Acting Secretary. I think there had been so much discussion by that time of the need to do something against the North if another serious incident occurred that there was very little fundamental debate. I remember discussions with Ball on the day that occurred that made it seem pretty much like a preordained conclusion and indeed the decision was made awfully fast--I forget what the hour span was, but it was telescoped. And it reflected the several very dire incidents that had occurred and the debates that had occurred on earlier incidents in the preceding two or three months.

M: During that period somewhere there was a long memo from George Ball that got leaked to Joseph Alsop as I recall, where he expressed grave reservations about the whole business. Was there a clear strategic dissent in the Department as early as that period?

R: Yes.

M: And Ball the figurehead that represents that point of view?

R: George was the principal author of a memorandum--I couldn't pinpoint it in time now. The brief-writing that I recall best in which Ball was the principal spokesman for the view that lost was in the June-July period when there was the major undertaking to triple the ground forces in the South.

M: The troop commitment time.

R: Yes. But there were other briefs during that winter and spring period after the bombing program became regularized.

M: Was it understood from the beginning that it would be regularized?

R: It wasn't as clear as all that. At first, the underlying premise was that it would be in

retaliation for major provocations. Then it very rapidly drifted into a regular course of conduct; retaliation is not an attractive premise to base major action on, and you're comparing apples and oranges in the most classic sense if you're trying to judge whether to strike X target because of a barracks' dynamiting or the blowing up of a bus. And as I recall it, in two or three weeks after the Pleiku bombing, everyone wanted to get away from trying to rationalize it on the ground of retaliating for a specific incident. The incidents were coming thick and fast, and the bombing program began to be looked at as a regular course of action. At that stage, I remember very early in the game--actually this is the first specific brief writing that I recall George Ball undertaking, and I remember assisting him in it. Very early in the game, perhaps a month after it had begun, we put together our first series of briefs indicating the extreme risks involved in terms of the larger involvements with the Chinese and the Soviets and the possibility of kicking off a much larger North Vietnamese response against the South than was then occurring, or that we were then conscious of occurring. Because the regular unit awareness was just very slowly seeping in at that point.

M: But he had been Acting Secretary at the time the retaliatory bombing for Pleiku was ordered?

R: Yes. It's one of the ironies of the period that he was.

M: But he apparently didn't dissent strongly from at least that application.

R: That's as I recall it.

M: What about the troop use? Was it fairly clearly thought from the beginning that this type of air activity would necessitate a greater amount of troops for ground support?

R: No. I think we all get rather poor marks for foresight on that score. I don't recall any very profound prophecies on the part of the military or the civilian advisers to the President on this particular score; it was a drift. And even when the first Marines landed at Da Nang and the first perimeter rules of engagement were worked out, no one was looking ahead much beyond the end of their nose. I think that's one of the principal inadequacies of the advice we were able to give the President at that period.

M: What brought on then the quick need to go up hard and fast in the summer--the troop decision that you mentioned Ball's participation in awhile ago?

R: A realization by the Embassy and MACV that what was there wasn't nearly adequate to stem what had then become a fairly large infusion of North Vietnamese regular troops, and a very badly fragmented political situation in the South. It was during the period of almost revolving door governments. And both the military and civilian advisers in the field came in with this very strong recommendation which was backed up, as I recall it, by

Secretary McNamara who had taken one of these trips out there and returned urging this major commitment.

M: What about the foresight or prophecy rate at that time? Did anybody think 543,000 or whatever was the ultimate number?

R: No. I can recall we used the figure a quarter-of-a-million, as I recall it, in the Ball briefs to the President; and that was considered absolutely dirty pool by Secretary McNamara, for one. He thought that was an outrageous figure, that no one had been recommending that, and what was George talking about prophesying that that was going to be that high level of engagement; it wasn't going to be that much, and on, and on, and on.

But in looking at those briefs, the military ones as well as the civilian ones that went to the President, I guess the principal shortcoming with all of the luxury of looking back at this late date is that none of us had a real appreciation of the weakness of the fabric of society in the South. The briefs were terribly deficient in forecasting the lack of coherent sense of nationhood in the South. We knew but didn't see the importance of the three kingdom division that had split Viet Nam until very recently historically. We had no idea of the paucity of leadership and manpower that we were dealing with. The Ball briefs in my opinion, and you'll get radical differences of opinion, stand up infinitely better on reading today in terms of foresight and wisdom than the military briefs which had a desperately simplistic approach--that if you put in such-and-such efforts, you'll get out these results; never taking the obvious next step of what the North Vietnamese would be able to do and had the will to do. But again, even our warnings in those briefs weren't terribly profound; we overemphasized the Chinese and the Russian risks--that was the big lead piece in the brief writing.

M: Was Ball pretty much alone at the high level at this point?

R: Yes.

M: No Senators strongly supporting him even at this date?

R: No.

M: So it was pretty hard to stand against unanimous--Pentagon and State and everybody else.

R: It sure was.

M: This is almost impossible to do, but it might have some value as insight--what was the level of optimism in the sense of did most of you think that it was doable that summer, that we could succeed in doing if we just applied the proper means?

R: I think that was the prevailing view, and it was the dominant view.

M: What about the actual meetings and all that led to those troop decisions? Were you involved close enough to see the inner working of those pretty well?

R: Well, certainly not on the Presidential level. I was not privy to those at all, so I'm speaking only of the papers that moved forward and the meetings that I saw and attended in State.

M: But that was one of these cases where everybody did sit down and a decision was reached--

R: I wish I could say that. I don't think that level of calm deliberation prevailed there either. I think it was more of, "My God! What a terrible situation this is! We've got to do this in order to not lose ground further or to reduce the rapid deterioration of the situation." And there wasn't much looking ahead, I regret to say in recollection.

M: Once that had been decided on, it seems to me that the military action just added numbers from time to time; but was there a basic military reconsideration at some subsequent time--consideration of, you know, "should we continue this, or should we try to lose as little as possible and cut our losses?"

R: I don't remember ever seeing a "cut your losses" paper from a military source throughout the period from beginning to end; I don't think there was such a thing. And I think it's very symptomatic of the entire military process. You receive an assignment, then you work within that assignment. So when you tried to raise these basic questions, "Is the whole thing worth the candle," there was a very heavy tide to the contrary.

M: You did extend from time to time the character of the air targets-- to Hanoi a few times, and then I guess--was it the summer of '66 to Haiphone POL level for the first time?

R: Yes.

M: Did that kind of thing find ready response in the White House, or was there a major division there?

R: No. It was a process which was agonized from beginning to end. Each new target list--the whole program was called Rolling Thunder. The military would come forward with X targets that they wanted to hit, and it would be called Rolling Thunder whatever the number happened to be. And they would be limited to those targets or the earlier authorized ones until they came forward with a new list, which would have the next higher number. And that list when it contained new firsts, in terms of proximity to Hanoi, or types of target, would be very carefully picked over at the Department of State. We didn't

ever get as much advance look at it as we'd like but we worked out procedures that were perfectly adequate.

M: You did get enough input so that it wasn't a decision the President made with only military advice?

R: No. There was never as much as we'd like, as I say, but it became fairly regularized that we would get a day or two look at it in advance. Bill Bundy's bureau would be able to come up with recommendations pro or con on those significant departure targets, and frequently we would append dissenting opinions or concurring opinions at the Seventh Floor level. I would normally package this for Secretary Rusk with all of our recommendations for him to take to the Tuesday lunch, or the meeting when it was going to be discussed. Those new targets were very, very closely looked at, and the President kept a very tight personal rein on the entire process. I think the slowness with which the targeting went north in the escalation probably had a significant part in the non-response of the Soviets and the Chinese; it was something that we took a very substantial part in slowing down.

M: Did the President consistently refuse any particular type of target?

R: No. I don't recall any general rules running through here. He would usually come to some middle decision between State recommendations, Defense recommendations, if there was a split, and it would proceed accordingly.

Then of course when we got into the period of maximum bombing, accident started playing a terribly significant and unfortunate role because when you're targeting a place five miles out of Hanoi-- a rail junction--and as so often happens the weather is bad or pilot error enters the picture, and you hit something closer to the heart of the city or you have a significant incident occurring frequently, so tragically frequently, at a bad time diplomatically--or what seemed like a very bad time diplomatically.

M: What about the ground tactics? Did the State Department have an equal input on those?

R: No. Much lesser one unless there was a major departure of cross-border operations, for instance, the introduction of B-52's in the South. We did not attempt to have much say on the course of the war in the South. It was in the hands of so many ground commanders [that] it wasn't attempted.

M: What about the pacification side of the ground effort--did the State Department feel like it got it adequately emphasized as compared to the strictly military side?

R: Well, it had been upgraded in terms of bureaucratic attention, as you'll recall, by the creation of Bob Komer's office. I've forgotten what the date of that was, '66 or '67; and so

it was getting a very fair, full consideration in Washington under his tutelage from the Executive Office Building.

M: While all of this was going on, there were all sorts of steps to peace that you were probably more closely involved in actually as the Chief of the Message Center over there. When would you say that the Department really developed a serious negotiating position for the first time?

R: Well, the first one I recall was in the fall of '65--we called it the XYZ Affair.

M: That is the Gullion episode?

R: Yes, in the fall of that year.

M: Why don't you just describe that, if you would?

R: Well, through Ed Gullion initially, and then we used another retired foreign service officer who was living in Spain, whose name escapes me, but--

M: Paul Sturm?

R: Yes. We established a contact with Mai Van Bo, the North Vietnamese Consul General in Paris, and tried to get into a dialogue with the North Vietnamese. The thrust of that particular exercise was a rewriting of the North Vietnamese position, which was their four points of that particular period. We did a surprisingly minimal rewrite of those points to make it acceptable to the United States, and went back at them with this as a suggested basis for talking. And there was a serious dialogue which occurred in the fall period and in the winter; how seriously they were considering it at the Hanoi end I don't know, because this was at the period of maximum U. S. infusion of troops. But we were getting serious answers to serious questions. They broke it off and never told us why.

The next serious effort I guess was the Marigold encounter which we talked about the last time.

M: You leave out a couple that have gotten some minor publicity. Is the implication that in '64, for example, at the time that Seaborn was going back and forth that we were just looking for things we weren't prepared to ask serious questions at that point?

R: Well, we were asking questions, but we never got meaningful replies; and I don't equate that, in terms of seriousness of discussion or potential peace initiatives on the level with these other things that developed subsequently.

M: What about the U Thant incident?

R: To this day, and I've seen everything that [Adali] Stevenson left, I've seen everything that Secretary Rusk was able to recall and record, and that others--we put every piece of that puzzle together. And I still don't know whether there was any serious North Vietnamese initiative there. The closer you looked at it the more ambiguous it became, the less accurate and precise. The Secretary General looked in his reporting and his subsequent recollections of the whole thing, and it really looks less real than almost any of the other efforts of the period. And I thought then and think now that it was really much ado about nothing.

M: That went through the change of the year in '65, and then you went to the U. N. with some exploratory things in early '65. But again this was not seriously hoped for?

R: No.

M: It's just that you didn't think anything would develop--

R: No, the chances were so poor because with neither Vietnamese faction represented, with the Chinese not there, you simply didn't have the people you needed to talk to in the same room with you. And the Russians were representing the public adverse position in a situation in which they had to be most strong and negative in their posture. So the U. N. was just not the place where the right parties were assembled.

M: Was there a try during that same period to get the British and the Russians to reactivate the Geneva Conference as co-chairmen?

R: Yes, but again it was more form and less hope. Just as in the periodic representations on Laos, to the co-chairmen of the '62 accords to reconvene the conference, it was something you went through periodically just because if you succeeded you'd be better off. But you put very little hopes into the process.

M: What about the first bombing pause? That comes also in the spring--May of '65 the six-day pause?

R: Yes. What did we call that? I think we called it Mayflower. It really wasn't a terribly significant effort in my opinion. The President and the Secretary made frequent references to it as having gotten three negative responses in five days from all of the major parties. I think that is a strained construction of events.

We had had a curious come-on from the Soviets--to Pierre Salinger who was in Moscow at that period, which made it--gosh my recollection of dates is poor here--which made it look worth an effort. There was also a [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin and Bundy conversation that made it look worth trying. Five days is hardly--you're not going to get a major turnaround in that period, and it really wasn't worth too much in my opinion--the

whole effort.

M: Then when you come down past the XYZ thing in the fall, there's the major pause around Christmas of '65. Is that different and better conceived, or is it about the same?

R: Yes. It was an enormous effort--I misspoke earlier--I think the Bundy-Dobrynin conversation that I recall was in the fall period.

M: That's Mac Bundy?

R: Yes. The fall period of '65. Dobrynin leading Bundy to believe, and quite explicitly, that we could expect something favorable to happen if--I think he was then talking in terms of ten days or twelve days, I forget the precise--but less than two weeks--category. And the President was very skeptical of this. Secretary McNamara spoke to him about it on a visit to the ranch in the Thanksgiving period; he got a very negative response. We had thought that he had abandoned the idea really when we got word that he had changed his mind just at Christmas time, and that we were going to launch on a major peace offensive. It was an enormously active effort, how diplomatic I don't know in retrospect because we tried an awful lot of public efforts along with it in terms of the Harriman trip, and Soapy Williams, and others, which probably had a negative effect if anything. But it was a major and a serious effort on our part to get talks underway.

We coupled it with a reactivation of the track we had tried in the XYZ Affair, the rewrite of the Hanoi four points. In Rangoon we got Ambassador [Henry A.] Byroade to deliver these to the North Vietnamese there. We delivered, if my recollection serves me, the message was double--we attempted to double it in Moscow. I think we got a turndown there in terms of the Soviet willingness to act as intermediary at that period. Again, I'm awfully vague, and I may be giving you bad recollections at this point.

M: The sum result though was that no positive response from anywhere?

R: Absolutely. And we kept as careful tabs as we could on the truck level moving south; the infiltration rates. I think we over-emphasized the negative or hostile reaction on the ground, perhaps because there was such a tigerish look for evidence that our reconnaissance planes, which were continuing to fly over the North, would come back with pictures of trucks, and they would immediately put into a movement-South column when the damned thing might have been broken down on the side of the road as far as you could tell from looking at the photographs. But there was no question about the negative nature of the North Vietnamese posture at that time. They weren't ready to start negotiations, and this was very thoroughly demonstrated.

M: This was the one that Norman Cousins has charged that he had a glimmer of hope in?

R: Oh, that was nonsense. He reconstructed a whole theory on the basis of very flimsy, very tenuous, peripheral conversations in Paris. And the people he was talking to didn't represent anybody; as I recall it, the whole theory that he subsequently printed was just theory and nothing more.

M: There wasn't any great amount of dissent about resuming after the failure of this pause to produce anything?

R: Yes, there was quite a bit. Some of us thought it should have gone on further; that we had nothing to lose with the continuation of the effort. But again there was a fairly solid consensus built up to the contrary, and the resumption decision was made.

M: Is the next one then the Chester Ronning visit in May-June, '66?

R: You're a lot fresher on these dates than I am; I couldn't begin to place that.

M: I think that does come during '66. Is that a serious one?

R: It's not that in my mind. I remember we asked some questions through Ronning, and he got some answers, but it wasn't a terribly hopeful or serious effort.

M: You said the next serious one was Marigold, and we have talked about that. We also talked about the Sunflower--the London business at the end of that; but maybe some details were left out. By that time our track was what has been called the Phase A-Phase B.

R: Phase A-Phase B.

M: How did the confusion arise as to what we meant by that? It was apparently the key to the Sunflower thing.

R: Yes. I'm not sure I can accurately recap that for you at this point in time. We did have this A-B theory, or A-B proposal, by which we would have stopped, there would have been an understanding that in X period of time they would respond by coming forward with negotiations.

When the bombing was actually taken down for Tet in February of that year [1967], and it happened to coincide with Kosygin's visit to Wilson in England, the President was engaged on two tracks with correspondence to Ho--which of course was subsequently published--and correspondence to Wilson to tell him what our position was so that he could represent our position accurately if the subject got onto Viet Nam with Kosygin, as surely it would in the U. K. One or both of those letters were written with midnight oil and without the presence of a lawyer, and the tense slipped. And one of them

put in the present tense what had been a gap between the A performance and the B performance; and there was a substantive difference in meaning between the way the two proposals were formulated--it was simply a difference between future and present tense. And it was significant in terms of the issues of the moment. Whether either one of them would have ever elicited the response we hoped for can be debated until the cows come home, because we just don't know. There's certainly no one who can prove that either one of those formulations would have worked with the North Vietnamese because there's no hard evidence that they would have.

M: But the President's view didn't change, it was a drafting matter rather than a difference in decision at the White House?

R: I was reading that only through words that came to my desk, so I don't know, is the only honest answer. There was a substantive difference of meaning; whether it was intended and purposeful, I just honestly couldn't say. I remember when the difference became apparent to us at State the next day or the day after; we brought it back saying, "Was this intended, was this purposeful, was this meaningful." The answer was that the change was intended but was not important. In my view it was important.

M: But you were on the phone at this end with [Chester] Cooper. And he understood it one way, <u>differently</u> than it was understood here--is that right?

R: The British understood it in a different way. There was obviously no intent to confuse Chet in any way, shape, or form, and again my recollection is playing tricks on me here because I think we were able to apprise him very early in the game of the communication that had gone out on the other circuit which had this difference in it. But just what the time lag was I'd have to search my recollection a lot more than I'm able to do right now in my conversation with you.

M: I was driving at it from the standpoint--not trying to precondition the answer--but I was trying to ascertain for sure that the thing didn't break down because of either a lack of decision when Cooper was trying to get one here, or a change in decision that occurred while Cooper was there and of which he couldn't have known. You don't remember either of those things, apparently?

R: I think Chet had reason to feel that the groundrules had been changed on him by this difference in language. Just how significant that was in terms of the English at the moment and their ability to talk to the Soviets about our position is hard to reconstruct, but Wilson felt it was a fundamental difference, and I am inclined to agree.

M: There were also a couple of flurries in there--one involving Bobby Kennedy, I think, at just about that precise time; these were extra-curricular and not part of the State Department tract? Is that correct?

R: Yes, I don't recall that.

M: And then he came back from Paris shortly after that.

R: I do recall now. Who had he seen? Refresh my recollection on it.

M: He had seen Mai--Mai Van Bo, I think--in Paris along with an Embassy fellow whose name I've forgotten--Dean?

R: Yes, Jack Dean, I believe.

M: And thought he had picked up something. Anyway, this got published in Newsweek and apparently produced a stormy session with the President.

R: I do recall it now. It did not look like anything new or significant to us as reported by that Embassy officer; it looked like very much what we had gotten on other circuits in spades at that period.

M: Now, is there--

R: Now see, there are two tracks going on at the same time. There was the Moscow effort--

M: John Guthrie's

R: --with Guthrie, and the Cooper one in the U. K. And the Guthrie one came a-cropper right at this point. I'm sorry I can't remember these events more precisely.

M: Had that been a more hopeful one--the Guthrie one?

R: Well, that was the real dialogue with the North Vietnamese; we didn't know what we were dealing with with the Soviets--we assumed that they were relaying messages, but we knew we were getting through to the North Vietnamese with letters on the other circuit, so that seemed like the major one to us .

M: You said dialogue--were they talking back?

R: I think Guthrie got some conversations with--his contact in Moscow. They gave us some information.

M: Why did that one break up? Did we know at the time?

R: The Ho letter which came back was as negative as could be, and was published of course subsequently by them, led to the resumption of the bombing. We put a proposal to

Premier Kosygin which called for a much too early response by the North Vietnamese--I forget what the time frame was, but it was something like twenty-four hours in which we asked for a response if we have to continue the bombing halt. And there was no response. It was almost physically impossible for there to have been one. Then the bombing resumed and a highly negative reply came in from Ho--almost simultaneously. We don't know to this day, as far as I know, precisely the sequence of how those events reached Hanoi and what the decision process was there.

M: What about President Johnson's letter? Did the Department consider it a change of policy in any way--the whole letter, I mean? Was it a hardening of our position, as the critics have said?

R: Yes, I think it was.

M: Was it meant to be?

R: I don't know. But on its face and in its terms, I think this can be argued; that it somewhat toughened the position that--for instance, Secretary Rusk had put in one of his fourteen points in a public formulation in November or December, and then the conversations that we'd had with the British.

M: When is the next serious one after that? We've talked about the Kissinger one in the summer.

R: Let's see--what year are we in--we're in '66.

M: '67. That was all in February of '67.

R: February of '67.

M: Why don't you just start with that one? That would be the next one sequentially--the Glassboro one--and describe that chapter.

R: Well, the next chapter was at Glassboro. And on June 23 and 25 of '67. On the first day in Glassboro, if I recall correctly, the morning was devoted to fairly tough, standard, boiler-plate positions by the Soviets, and there wasn't too much new that came into the discussion. The lunch I believe was devoted to ABM, strategic missile problems. And in the afternoon Kosygin stated that he had received a message from the North Vietnamese which he wanted to give to the President; and it was to the effect that if the bombing stopped, negotiations would follow. I can't give you the key operative words beyond that--

M: Again, was this in conversations--you mentioned last time--just the two plus the

Department's translator.

R: Correct. But it was the Soviets putting on the record and acting as transmitter of a really quite forthcoming statement by the North Vietnamese--at least forthcoming in comparison with anything that we'd heard from them before.

The response to that message was drafted in Secretary Rusk's office on Saturday, the day between the two talks. Secretary McNamara was the only one with him and the only one privy to it in addition to Secretary Rusk. And they put together a response the tenor of which was that a bombing halt would be entirely possible if--and then there was a degree of mutuality in the clause--if the expectation could be that our allied troops in the northern part of South Viet Nam would not move northward; and if the North Vietnamese troops in the southern part of North Viet Nam would not move southward. And this reply was given, and I may be leaving out nuances--it has been a long time since I've seen it--by the President to Kosygin on Sunday in the afternoon, and there was very little discussion that took place about it between the two. But the nature of the response by Kosygin was something to the effect that, "This is good," or "This is responsive." I don't think he used the word good, but the inference--

M: It didn't turn him off, anyway.

R: Just to the contrary. The inference was that he thought he was bearing back an affirmative response.

We didn't hear anything after that for one week; for two weeks. We sent Ambassador [Llewellyn] Thompson a request to make a veiled inquiry about it which he did and wasn't able to elicit any sort of substantive reaction. Again, I couldn't give you a date but some time in late July--and I remember carrying this message over to Secretary Rusk who was up in the living quarters in the Mansion with the President, I think it was a weekend luncheon occasion--we got a very negative statement which was in the form of a message--a third person message from Kosygin, if I remember correctly. And it was just boiler-plate tough--"In view of the aggressive actions of U. S. troops, blah, blah, blah," and referencing a lot of bombing action that they claimed--and a trip by McNamara to Viet Nam, and all sorts of stuff. They claimed it just made a further affirmative response impossible.

M: But this is not one of those times when there was a specific accident that--?

R: Yes, there had been. But they weren't referenced in the reply. I think, if you look at the time sequence, it probably encompassed some very far-out bombing in North Viet Nam, in the Hanoi area. But this wasn't referenced in the reply, so it may or may not have had anything to do with the nature of the response. Of course the other question that is awfully hard to not ask yourself in retrospect is if we'd gone back with a simple yes, what

that would have elicited. Because our response, while very affirmative from our point of view, was iffy and involved mutuality of conditions--one of those problems on which they show or claim to show such sensitivity.

M: We've skipped the Kissinger one--what about the Harriman one in the fall with the Romanians? Is that a matter of much consequence?

R: Yes, it was. We called that Green Bay Packers because it looked like a winner.

M: It ended up like the Packers.

R: The Packers were riding high at that point.

M: Yes, that's right.

R: Averell Harriman had gotten into a first-class conversation with [Nicolae] Ceausescu [President of State Council, Romania] when he visited Bucharest in September; and he was simply articulating our fundamental view that the whole basis of our presence, our activities, and everything else were geared to permit the South Vietnamese to be able to determine their own future. And he dwelt obviously very effectively and very persuasively on this self-determination viewpoint. It struck a very responsive chord with Ceausescu who was encumbered by all sorts of ideological ideas about why we were there and what the whole thing was about.

M: He's the Foreign Minister?

R: No, he's the Prime Minister--a very powerful and tough little bird who had indicated considerable independence on the foreign side and runs a very tight dictatorship on the domestic side; he's an interesting person.

But at any rate we got into a position after Harriman had come back in which it developed that the Romanians were going to send a team involving their number two man in their foreign ministry-- what was his name? I don't recall.

M: I have it referenced somewhere; I can find it with no trouble at all?

R: And they offered to take any message that we would like and try to get any response that they could get. And we gave them, as I recall it, a restatement of the San Antonio formula which had been enunciated in September of that year. And they turned out to be absolutely first-class intermediaries--better than the French; better than the Russians. They were, as far as you could determine, faithful reporters of the other fellow's viewpoint in the capital which they were visiting. And it was a back and forth that looked quite hopeful for a short period.

M: What kind of restatement of the San Antonio formula--now, did that make it what was later the Clifford view of the San Antonio formula?

R: No. It may have been just really the straight San Antonio formula--I don't recall what significant variances there were; it was not as articulated by Clark Clifford during his nomination hearings.

M: It wasn't that far?

R: No. But it floundered just as the others had in terms of the North Vietnamese giving us a very, very flat turndown in the last round.

M: That then brought us to the time when we finally did turn it off and you've talked about that before, except that there seems to have been a considerable amount of questions arising about it since that time. Why are people going around shaking their heads saying they don't remember it the way the President told Walter Cronkite it happened?

R: Well, it's certainly not the way I remember it--I'll add my voice to that effect.

M: Is it the interpretation placed on events rather than the actual events that occurred?

R: I guess so, probably in essence. Obviously, a memorandum such as the one the President described did exist; he did get such a memorandum from Secretary Rusk. But I suppose the conflict, at least as I recall it, is in his prevailing mood and views throughout the month of March--at least as they came back to the bureaucracy. And I emphasize the fact that I didn't see him from the beginning of March to the end of March, so all of my knowledge was feedback knowledge and has to be discounted as such. But he to all evidence was taking a very, very hardboiled view throughout the month of March. I think if you look back at his public speeches, he had several--two or three Medal of Honor ceremonies--at which he was always waxing very, very, very tough. Wasn't that the month in which he talked to the Air Academy, I believe?

M: I believe so, yes, I believe you're right.

R: But those were also the same views that we got reflected in the private views that would come back to the bureaucracy at that period and not the affirmative ones that were accentuated in the television broadcast.

M: Then, you think that Clifford's influence was perhaps decisive over that period?

R: Who knows! Only the President, obviously. And I certainly wasn't privy to those councils at all, so my speculation would be just speculation on what was influential in his mind.

M: The Department did structure the "wise men" meeting though, didn't it?

R: Yes.

M: First, was it different than the earlier--the one in the fall, the November meeting of the same cast, roughly?

R: It was very different. This was right after Tet. Everyone was terribly discouraged by the Tet operations; the ability of the communists to mount that massive, that well coordinated an attack countrywide, with so dismally little intelligence on our part. The obviously enormous losses that they suffered as part of that operation were becoming known to us and looked very large, but the fact that screamed at you during that period was their ability to just romp at will over that much of the landscape of that miserable country. I think it really was sort of the central depressant of fact on the group of people that we called in at that time. And they were a very different group of men in outlook than the same group that had appeared the previous year.

M: But it was a matter of this changed circumstance and not changed structure of their briefing or--did you use different briefing officers for example that might have given a more pessimistic view?

R: They probably heard George Carver from the CIA on both occasions; I forget whether they heard Phil Habib the first time, but Bill Bundy was there both times--they were the same briefers. Bill Dupuy of Defense may have been at both, also, he was definitely at the second. I don't think there was any diabolical plot on the part of the briefers; the situation, well, you know, was just damned grim! In the files also at that point was this request for 200,000 additional U. S. troops.

M: Clearly understood to be a request for that?

R: Clearly understood to be a request for that; clearly preceded by the most optimistic statements from MACV right up to and right at the beginning of Tet. And it simply looked like an endless engagement and an endless rathole to most of the people who looked at it soberly at that point.

M: Once peace talks started, did our position change over a course of time regarding our demands, or did we start out with a fairly consistent position that we insisted be met one way or the other?

R: I don't really think of it in those terms.

M: Were instructions to Harriman and Vance consistent pretty well through the summer as to what they were trying to get accomplished?

R: Well, the instructions were written in anticipation. The issues that developed weren't covered by instructions on a number of occasions; they had been modified, molded to new situations as they did arise. And that process wasn't certainly anticipated in all of its chapters. It was a pretty well thought out in advance script, yes.

M: There was a widely publicized, during the summer--July, I think-- lull in infiltration. Did the delegation in Paris want to turn down our side in response to that?

R: Yes, they did.

M: Was there any chance that that would have been done here? Was there any serious consideration?

R: I think it got a very negative reception from the President.

M: From the President?

R: Yes.

M: What about the Departments? Did they get involved in--

R: I don't think the Secretary supported it at that period either. It was handled by the top level and wasn't a matter in which there were a lot of Departmental positions being prepared.

M: You mentioned the breakthrough in October last time, and there's no reason to berate that. Other than the always sort of guarded reference that a number of people make to the influences on the government of South Viet Nam that were causing them not to stay onboard after we had assumed they were on, do you have much hard evidence for this kind of thing?

R: Yes. And yet it was still circumstantial in terms of the names of the people involved, but it's awfully hard to look back on that without thinking that there were some fairly high level representations made to the South Vietnamese to hold firm against our government's positions that we were then arguing with them to accept--on the part of Republican leaders, precisely with what knowledge by the present President, nobody can say.

M: Are these now through Anna Chennault, or is there also another channel?

R: She was heavily involved; there were others involved. Some were described by the South Vietnamese who were contacted as quote, “Republican leaders,” end quote.

M: But not by name?

R: Not by name. Others were described as being part of the, quote, "Nixon entourage," but again not by name. But it was dirty pool.

M: It was important, particularly in the light of some of the things that Mr. Harriman has said since then.

R: You know, it was a very, very unseemly business, really thoroughly reprehensible on the part of the people that were engaged in it.

M: Once that was solved and the bombing was totally stopped, Mr. Harriman at least had indicated that the delay here was crucial; did the delegation in Paris come back with a recommendation in late November to change the ground strategy from the maximum feasible pressure--turn down our side of the ground activity that the Washington people turned down?

R: Our Paris negotiators were impressed with the absence of any significant violations of the three understandings basic to the bombing halt in that first two or three week period. And they argued that we were the ones that were not performing on the agreement by virtue of our inability to deliver the South Vietnamese in Paris. And it was a tortuous business. For one thing, while Dirksen, on behalf of the President-elect indicated that he wanted Saigon to go along with our government's position, they didn't. And as one person who stayed on through the transition period and coordinated the transition in the State Department and saw about a month of it before I left the Department, the President-elect and the new Secretary of State and Henry Kissinger came in with the firm conviction that the Johnson Administration--and particularly Mr. Harriman and Mr. Clifford by their public statements--had so hurt our relations with the South that their first and foremost effort would be to get smooth relations established with Saigon. They would be nice to the South Vietnamese where we had not done so. This was the prevailing view in that early period.

M: Was there quite a lot of bitterness in that same period between the Department and Clifford, who was making various public statements, obviously trying to pressure the South Vietnamese to get on-board?

R: With some in the Department and not with others.

M: That's always a good answer. This was the period when Mr. Rusk said they were not wrestling on the floor, but were they wrestling at one level above the floor?

R: Well, there were some people who thought this was a good idea, and there were others who thought it was harmful.

M: That's probably as good a place as any to ask what's really the last question I

have--specific one. There are enough things coming out now, particularly from the Defense Department--I'm thinking particularly of Tim Hoopes' book, there are others too--to indicate that from a fairly early date at least a lot of the juniors in the Defense Department were not totally in sympathy with what we were doing. Is the same thing true in the State Department?

R: Yes.

M: Does this just never surface?

R: Well, I think it was channeled the way it should have been; I think through briefs to the President from the Under Secretary, through the actions of Nick Katzenbach when he was Under Secretary and chaired a little committee.

M: The non-group or non-committee?

R: Yes.

M: Do those get to the President though--ever?

R: Sure. Not frequently, but yes, sometimes. And of course there are occasions when both those men were Acting Secretaries. I think those views were brought home to the President.

M: It wasn't a case of him not knowing then that there were a lot of bright young men both in Defense and State who were disaffected?

R: Well, I certainly can't say that. From where I sat, I don't know. But those views existed; they were transmitted and as far as I know were faithfully conveyed to him in various forms.

M: The things like the so-called Harriman peace group that you worked with some was a seriously constituted, seriously charged thing within the Department? It wasn't sabotaged from within--?

R: No. Harriman's memoranda--he would give me copies for the Secretary of State; he would transmit one to the President directly--the Secretary would transmit his memoranda. There was no blockage or attempt to keep those views from going forward. Secretary Rusk was really extraordinarily big in terms of letting his colleagues that felt differently from him do this to a really remarkable degree throughout this period.

M: You started to grin when I said "really serious" in connection with the Harriman group. Was there something in that grin?

R: No, it wasn't intended to be.

I think it was set up with part public relations in mind and had more than a casual relation with the '66 elections; but it was a serious group, and Mr. Harriman didn't have the President's ear constantly by a long shot, but his views got through.

M: The last time we talked I offered you an open-ended conclusion, and you gave me a couple of interesting anecdotes. Have more been suggested to you here this afternoon?

R: No, I think I've filled up much too much of your tape here already.

M: Not at all. You've been quite patient, and I thank you very much again.

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