INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD G. STILWELL

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.

G: I notice in General [William] Westmoreland's memoirs [*A Soldier Reports*] he refers to you as "a close associate in many previous assignments before he came to Vietnam." When had you served with General Westmoreland previously?

S: He was the superintendent of the Military Academy when I was the commandant of the cadets. And then, of course, he joined MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] as the deputy while I was the Three, and then I became chief of staff for [General Paul] Harkins, and stayed on as Westy's chief of staff. Then, of course, Westy was still in command when I came back, obviously at his request, to be successively the deputy commander of the Third Marine Amphibious Force, and then the commander of the XXIV Army Corps. And on the completion of that assignment, I became the DCSOPS [Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans] of the army, again under General Westmoreland. So I have served under his command, therefore, on four occasions in five different capacities.

G: This is an aside and not necessarily on here [the list of questions], but as long as General Westmoreland's name has come up, do you have any impressions of the trial, the recent

imbroglio between General Westmoreland and CBS? What did you make of all that?

S: Well, a number of things. First, I feel very badly that Westy agreed in the first instance to appear on "Sixty Minutes." I think that was a strategic mistake on his part. And I don't know what his motivations for doing it were. That's my first point.

My second point is that--again, all these are retrospective and therefore Monday-morning quarterbacking--it is clear that Westy and his immediate supporters did not do as much research as they might have before they filed the suit, from a legal standpoint, the judgment of the best minds in the country, which I'm sure would have been available, as to the likelihood of winning that case.

My third point is--I guess, related to the second point--is whether or not the Capitol Legal Foundation services, whatever it was, had the same single objective as General Westmoreland did, or whether they had their own agenda as to the cost-gain calculus on that suit, or whether, as I say, they saw that suit, win, lose or draw as a springboard for advancing their own fortunes. I don't know that; as I say, that's purely speculative. The *denouement* of the whole thing makes me just a little suspicious of whether they didn't, at that stage of the game, push Westy precipitately to the decision to terminate the trial. And whether or not General Westmoreland had opportunity to seek outside counsel. I don't know the answers to those questions. But the end result, it seems to me, was to leave the impression within the country as a whole that it was anything other than a kind of a victory for CBS and not for Westy. Now it will have, as a lot of people have commented, it does have an indirect effect, I think, on the media as to the aggressiveness with which they will, in the future, push some of these provocative stories.

But I guess the last point I would make on that is related to something we said earlier at the breakfast period, that we were dealing essentially with counting rules, and substantively no matter how you look at it, the unarmed elements of the opposing force do add to their combat capability. I mean, you can't disregard them at all, and when one looks at the capabilities of the adversary, one has to count not only his front line forces but his total support structure. So it really was an argument, I think, that had something less than total substance, because it was just a question of what box you put these people in.

G: Precisely. I know when the thing first came up I looked at it and said, "Well, these guys are arguing about the nature of the war, and they're never going to agree."

S: That' s right.

G: It's that simple. But in any case--

S: But certainly there was no conspiracy, to begin with.

G: My information is that you wrote Appendix E of the Draper Report. Is that accurate?

S: I can't tell you what Appendix E is. I wrote a small volume on training, and the importance of that element of our foreign assistance program, economic, technical, military, that was devoted to the education, training, preparation of the human resources of a country. It was general, as opposed to country-specific. But yes, I was heavily involved in the presidential commission that was more commonly known as the Draper Commission.

G: This was a study of the direction foreign aid should take?

S: This was a mammoth study involving some very fine people, of the direction, redirection of the totality of U.S. assistance for our friends and allies abroad.

G: What had prompted this?

S: I can't tell you definitively what prompted it. We were then at the outset of the second Eisenhower administration, and experience up to that point had suggested that while in the overall we were making some real progress in the rebuilding process, that there were also structural, philosophical, fiscal problems with it. The commission, of course, concluded this as any bipartisan group would seem, is that it was a very, very important element of U.S. foreign policy, needed to be continued, needed to be expanded, needed to be improved in certain areas on the basis of our projection. I think one of the key conclusions and recommendations, if you get that report out, was that it needed to be done on the basis of long-range planning, five- or more year programs, approved in concept by the Congress so that there could be stability in the development and prosecution of the program, and to provide a much better basis for the United States and the recipient country for getting together and planning on a basis of a level of funding, to which the indigenous contributions could be matched, as opposed to doing it as we continue to do today, on a year-by-year basis.

As I say, we had some tremendous people in on that, to include [John?] McCloy, Joe Collins, a number of other very stalwart people, and, of course, Bill [General William H.] Draper himself. George Lincoln, who was [George C.?] Marshall's chief planner, was the executive director. We had a good team.

G: Let's jump ahead just a little. You arrived in Vietnam in April 1963, is that correct?

S: That is correct.

G: Had you any special briefing, insights, experience, which you found useful when you came to apply yourself to the situation in Vietnam?

S: I had some background on Vietnam. As we have discussed before, during my tenure in the Central Intelligence Agency, I had been for two and a half years the organizer and chief of the Far East Division on the so-called action side, that is to say, political-psychological-paramilitary side, with Indochina as one of my areas of responsibility. We had a very modest program with respect to Indochina, because it was an area of French responsibility, and we never did work out any *modus operandi* with the French which would permit the harnessing of the type of assets that we might have in a definitive way to them.

We felt that we might be able to do something as a broker to help develop a more effective indigenous non-communist apparatus to work in conjunction with the French against the Ho Chi Minh forces. The French were not all that interested in our support, I suppose suspicious that we were just as interested but from a different perspective, in getting the establishment of a viable, free South Vietnam.

I did make two trips out there, but as I say, we were essentially on the sidelines for that. I had two or three operatives in the country who helped us ascertain what was going on, and gave us some idea of the extent to which that non-communist part of Vietnam forces were fragmented.

Subsequently, partially as a result of my CIA experience, I'd been asked by the secretary of the army to do two studies. The first was ways and means to increase the capabilities of what was our special warfare center at Fort Bragg. And second, stemming from that, and I guess partially as a result of that first study, to come up with ideas and recommendations as to the role of the United States Army in counterinsurgency. So I developed a study in 1961, when I was at the Military Academy, that became the basis for a

number of subsequent activities of the United States Army.

My basic thesis was that this was a job in which the Special Forces had a role, but by no means exclusive role, and the United States Army had all sorts of assets that could be brought to bear in a counterinsurgency environment--low intensity conflict, if you will. So it was something of a definitive paper that might possibly be of some interest. We can find a copy of that.

G: I'd love to have it. What--

S: It's pretty clear that those experiences on my *curricula vitae* were the basis of my being assigned to Vietnam. Of course, I had met and worked with General [Paul] Harkins during the Korean War.

G: What was your assessment of the situation? Perhaps I should ask how long it took you to make an assessment of the situation when you arrived in country. I think the Buddhist troubles were just erupting about that time.

S: They were latent when I first got there. Well, like any professional soldier, I set about very assiduously making trips, getting briefed from the various parts of the--not only from MACV, but from the U.S. mission as a whole. I went in to be the J-3, chief of operations, and found that the J-3 shop that I inherited did not have surveillance over all of the assets that MACV had available to it for this, point one. Point two, I concluded that the situation was more serious than the conventional wisdom would indicate: that the depth of our knowledge as to the state of internal security, the length and breadth of South Vietnam, left much to be desired, that we really didn't know and that there was therefore considerable scope for a wide variety of opinions, that we were of course dependent in very large

measure on what was being reported to us by our Vietnamese associates, some of whom were quite forthcoming, and some of whom were obviously withholding information from us. All of whom may have had a special reason for what they told us, perhaps in more dire terms than could be justified. Or what they didn't tell us. And therefore a considerable premium attached to what we could find out, to the extent we could find out anything with our own eyes and ears.

And at that time, of course, the evidences of disenchantment with the Catholic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem were beginning to surface, particularly in the northern part of the area, the Hue-Da Nang area, as well in Saigon itself. All of them exacerbated by a press, American press, that was hardly helpful to the cause of the administration. Well, I guess the long and short of it was that the issue was very much in doubt, and that we were not at all in the position that was initially being voiced: that we were over the hump as far as the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was concerned, that the trend lines were right. The trend lines were certainly not right.

But again, it reflected the fact that the United States government as a whole, most of the players, myself included, simply had not grasped the immensity of the problem that we were confronting.

G: Speaking of the press, the press seemed to make a lot of the reporting system that existed in the U.S. mission, claiming very often that we stressed optimism in reports to the detriment of accuracy. How much truth is there to this [Inaudible]?

S: I suppose the emphasis was on--a progress report by its nature is designed to emphasize the good versus the bad. But the formats that were used, the so-called Hamlet Evaluation

System, were the best that the human mind could design at that time, but also constrained by, as I say, our lack of appreciation of all the indicators that really counted. As I think I mentioned to you before, that one of the problems in any kind of system that's built on the number of incidents, violations of the norms of law and order and so forth, one of its deficiencies is the fact that the lack of incidents can be a measure of a well-pacified area, or one that's totally dominated by the other side.

Yes, the forms were deficient. But the main thing is how accurate are the entries that go onto any form? And there again, you had one or two Americans who were the reporting channel in a very large province, unable to ascertain the facts themselves. And so you have a Vietnamese reporting system, in essence, which goes loop-the-loop, and the Vietnamese really make the entries, except to the extent that an individual, of his personal knowledge, can change it. But he also had to live with that individual, his counterpart, and his efficacy as an advisor, a representative, depended upon that personal rapport. So no reporting system, in my view, can be totally valid unless it's our own, and then it's subject to, of course, our own predilections and so forth.

But in any event, in 1963 there were serious reasons for viewing with suspicion any tabulated report of the condition in any particular area. So the press had a point. The reports coming out of MACV were more optimistic, to be sure, than the reports being submitted by the rural affairs division of the AID mission--whatever we called it in those days; I've forgotten--and were more optimistic than some of the CIA reports that were emanating in that. I think you'll find that true almost in any environment where you have a major U.S. presence; people look institutionally at it, look at it from their own institutional

prejudices or bases or whatever. And we had some major arguments within the whole diplomatic mission on the status of security, progress, pacification, whatever, the length and breadth of Vietnam. It was an area that was highly contentious, obviously, but MACV and General Harkins, on the basis of the reports coming in from the military chain of command, I think, was looking at the problem from a narrower view than the embassy and its provincial reporters on the one hand, or AID on the other.

Again, it gets back to the appreciation on the part of the U.S. representatives overall as to the nature of the conflict, and a failure to understand then and for a long time thereafter that we were confronting a North Vietnam, half a nation, and a fourth or fifth power at that, that was committed to total war, whatever the cost, for as long as it took. In contrast to this is the United States' view that this was an expedient effort, where a little bit of help would assist the South Vietnamese, and I guess a failure to recognize the implications of a South Vietnam that was politically still very fragmented, and that had not yet had the opportunity to develop the institutions of a government.

G: What were your relations with the press like? Did you know any reporters?

S: Oh, yes. They obviously sought me out, and from time to time they used to walk home with me, which was my only free time to talk to them. [Laughter] Well, like any other professional category, they ranged from the good to the mediocre to the malevolent, if you wish. [David] Halberstam was very active at that particular time, and I didn't trust him then, and my wife didn't trust him--

G: Why was that?

S: Well, just his whole approach. I don't trust any man who thinks he has, at a very junior age,

all the wisdom that one needs to make these pontifical judgments. And I must say that one of my problems with Halberstam was that he was a very major actor in political developments at that time, and then turned around and tried to be an objective chronicler of what happened.

G: That's interesting statement. In what respect was he an actor?

S: He was an actor in the sense that with the *New York Times* as his outlet, and his reporting of Halberstam's view of what had happened, he had a very major role in magnifying the Buddhist problem for the world at large, and particularly the United States. And I'm not at all convinced that if there hadn't been a world press available to it, that the Buddhist problem would have reached the dimensions and had the instigation it had. I would remind you that Khomeini in refuge in Bagdad was one thing, but Khomeini sitting in France with the world press at his disposal was quite another.

G: I don't mean to put words in your mouth, but are you suggesting that we have something of a self-fulfilling prophecy here?

S: I am persuaded that the developments in Vietnam in 1963 were given a great push forward and partially the result of the press treatment of that time. I don't know, can't justify that at all. But there have been a number of books written on this whole thing; there've been a number of seminars on the role of the press in Vietnam. And I haven't--you know, my good friend Peter Braestrup had one view. Now he was, in my view, one of the more objective guys in this whole thing. [Neil] Sheehan of UPI [United Press International] or API [Academic Press Incorporated]; I can't remember--anyhow, it seemed to me that those early days in Vietnam represented kind of a watershed for the role of the press abroad. And

remarkably critical, of course, of General Harkins and everybody else. We may have played that wrong; I don't know, but there may have been a way to have taken the press aboard, and maybe we were deficient in our briefings of the press. We didn't have a major--I don't remember any basic policy session with Fritz [Frederick Ernest] Nolting, Harkins and the others to sit down and say, "What can we do to insure a) that the press is made part of us, part of our team, as opposed to a generally adversarial force? All of this was complicated by the fact that you're working with a host government, too. But the press was able to discern the splits, the schisms within the U.S. mission on the appreciation of the size of the problem that we were confronting. It didn't help.

G: Who were some of the other good reporters? You mentioned Peter Braestrup.

S: I'll have to check that out; the names escape me now. I thought in those days Peter Arnett was pretty good; he changed later on, but I thought he was a man I could talk to at that stage of the game.

G: You mentioned Neil Sheehan, but I don't think you characterized him.

S: He wasn't very helpful either. He was . . .

G: Is it possible to generalize about the state of these schisms within the country team that you have mentioned? Is it possible to characterize who tended to take sides on what issues? For example, you run across statements that there was a schism between the top-level CIA people in the mission and the field agents.

S: I didn't mean that at all, if I said that. I guess I'd put it this way, that Paul Harkins and Charlie Timmes, who was chief of the MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group], were more optimistic than I thought they had reason to be, and with conviction and belief, in my

view, based on their appreciation of the trends. The deputy chief of the diplomatic mission, Bill--his name escapes me now.

G: Bill Trueheart?

S: Bill Trueheart. He chaired the mission working group that [had] responsibility for analyzing the situation, determining ideas of what we might do, progress reports and so forth, which involved MACV and the MAAG on the one hand, and the rural affairs division and the provincial reporters and the USIA [United States Information Agency] types, USIS [United States Information Service] types and so forth, with the individuals who had operative responsibilities in their respective areas out in the field. It was at that level that you had a forum for the expression of appreciations from these different elements. In there you got both exposed to what the other fellow was saying, and had an opportunity to argue with him from your appreciation, but at that level it became a hell of a lot clearer that wherever the actual final zero truth was, that there were some deep and endemic security problems out there--security, administrative, malfeasance, mismanagement or whatever--that suggested that there was a hell of a lot less room for optimism in the summer of 1963 than one might think, if one reported on what was happening within one's narrow institutional responsibility. So Trueheart, in my view, had a more informed and a more pessimistic view than Nolting.

On the military side, we obviously didn't have schisms *per se*; you don't have schisms in the military. You can weigh in and obviously to the extent of your persuasiveness in modifying the kind of reporting that's going forward. But there were a whole array of reports that were going in routinely that aren't checked off by the whole

brass. But I suppose the major schism that developed was when [Henry Cabot] Lodge replaced Nolting there as the chief of mission, with his instructions from Washington. It was my understanding at that stage of the game that Ambassador Lodge had instructions to do what he could to find a basis with Diem for putting Nhu on the sideline as a priority task, and to think about alternatives only if he concluded that Diem was absolutely intractable in that whole area. It was also my understanding that after one meeting with President Diem, that Ambassador Lodge concluded that he just couldn't work with that guy, and that that then put us on the wicket of somehow tacitly supporting--

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--the change in government.

G: At what point did you become aware that there was a movement afoot to pull off a coup? I mean, at what point did this go beyond the rumor stage; when did you have concrete knowledge?

S: I don't know. There had been--I never had official knowledge, at any time. Nobody in MACV did. We'd gotten to a point where things had gotten pretty tense, as I recall, in early October of 1963, that there might be a coup. That all died down. We had a number of emissaries in and out from Washington; my memory is pretty vague on this one.

G: Do you remember the [Victor] Krulak-[Joseph] Mendenhall visit?

S: I remember the Krulak-Mendenhall visit, yes, of course I do. I remember Mike Forrestal. I think he was on the scene then; I'm not sure.

But we knew something was in the wind, because there were some backchannel messages going back and forth on the military chain, in which Harkins was, among other

things, saying, as he said to most of the people, this is a very dangerous wicket to be on, because you don't know what the hell you're going to get. But it did come as a surprise to me, although in the background you're living in an area where a coup could occur. The only time when I did get the call--when Rufus [Phillips?] and I, just the two of us, were having lunch at my house--from General Tran Van Don that the coup would be starting in an hour or so.

I didn't keep a diary--I suppose I should have--of that particular period, but we were so damn busy, and the prospects of a coup and the political upheaval were superimposed upon an eighteen-hour day of keeping the activities going. And so the coup occurred. As I told you, that having asked the pointed question of General Tran Van Don, "What about the President?" he said he was not going to be harmed. And I said, "Good." And I think he said, "We need him," but he may not have said that.

In any event, the murder of Diem was a most unfortunate event, and put us on a much more slippery slope than we would have been before, because, as General Harkins had predicted, "you don't know what you're going to get." And what you did get was a breakdown of the chain of command, and the loss of legitimacy of a leader who was the father of his country; who by popular mandate was the commander-in-chief, head of state, chief executive, to whom allegiances ran, and to whom the province chiefs felt responsible. And thereafter [Duong Van] Minh, originally Big Minh, totally unprepared for the political, economic, and psychological responsibilities that a head of state would have, and those who succeeded him, could not maintain the allegiance, the disciplined response from the province chiefs, who were all military, to be sure, but were wearing different hats. So if

Diem had remained alive, it might have been quite a different show. Terrible mistake.

G: Did you know John Richardson well?

S: I knew John reasonably well, worked with him. Of course, in my job it's logical that I would work with him. Originally, of course, the CIA station chief had operational control of rather a considerable number of Special Forces who were working for them, and gradually we took that program back from them. John was a very capable performer. So I used to have a periodic breakfast with John on matters of joint concern. I never did talk to him in any great depth about the internal politics of Vietnam. But I knew, of course, a good many of John's people, from prior incarnation as well as our work out in the field.

G: Do you know why he was relieved in October?

S: No, but I can find out. At least, I've forgotten. I'm not sure at the time I recognized it as a relief as opposed to a routine transfer. Your information was a--

[Interruption]

One of my closest friends who was with me--and with Sam Williams, too, in World War II--who I'd brought into the agency in my OPC [Office of Policy Coordination] days and stayed in the agency, who was on the scene as one of the principal deputies to Richardson in 1963. Just ask him. [I] can't remember. I'd just ask him routinely.

G: Do you remember who took his place?

S: Yes. He's now deceased. He was hurt in the bombing of the embassy a year or so later. It seems to me it begins with a D. I'll get it in a minute.

G: Peer DeSilva?

S: Peer DeSilva, yes.

G: There was a hiatus there of about three months, and I haven't been able to plug somebody into the gap there.

S: I'll get that name for you, too.

G: What was your vantage point for observing the events of the actual coup? You said you were at lunch when the thing began.

S: Well, I was at lunch; I got this telephone call from Don and he said, "I wanted you to know," to be the first to know, or something to that effect. I repaired immediately back to the office; it took me five minutes to get there, telling Rufe, who went his way, and then I filed what we called the CRITIC [critical intelligence communication?] message that alerted the world of this development that was, I figured, authentic without question.

Curiously, just an hour before, eleven o'clock in the morning, when Timmes saw Admiral [Harry] Felt off at the airport, there was some contact with the press, and Timmes informed Felt and the world that the situation was stable, that there'd be no political upheaval. Of course, that was the headline in the *Stars and Stripes* the next morning. [Laughter]

[I] informed General Harkins on all this; I took my post to find out what was going on. We [were] particularly concerned about troop movements into the city, as an indication of what support the so-called coup leaders had on the one hand, and the implications of leaving their operational areas on the other. The fighting, of course, was sporadic. There were tremendous troop movements all around the city; obviously, the radio station, the presidential security barracks, and the palace itself were the key areas and basically were where the operation continued. There was shelling of the barracks of the presidential

security force. My house, where my family lived, was on the gun-target line, so we have some shrapnel from that.

So I spent all that time right in the office, in the operations center, until the wee hours of the morning. One of my subordinates was billeted just across the street from the palace, so from his vantage point under a table (Laughter) he was able to keep us fairly well informed of what was going on. So I went home to see how the family was around midnight, and they were all right except they were emotionally distressed. It was quite an experience to put an American family through.

It was all over by midnight. We didn't know, of course, until the following morning, when I went out to Vietnamese military headquarters, where I had representatives, of course, to find out what the story was and see what was the situation. We found out that Diem was dead.

G: But you had no representative there as the coup was proceeding, is that correct?

S: Well, yes, I had a representative out at Vietnamese headquarters.

G: Oh, you did?

S: Yes. But the coup leaders weren't--I don't know where they were. He had no access to them. The man who was closest at that stage was Lou Conein, and he was with, or had access to, the leaders of the coup.

G: You had known Big Minh before this.

S: Yes, I had several conversations with Big Minh, and I'd known a little bit about him from General Woody Stromberg [?], who had earlier been one of his advisers. A simple man, a good troop leader, but totally unqualified to be a head of state. Fairly narrow horizons. I

believe Big Minh was essentially loyal to Diem and willing to serve under Diem if he could but change certain of his actions and be more prudent in who he trusted, who he gave authority to, and be more tolerant of the rights and aspirations of the Buddhist segment of the population. And Big Minh was convinced that [Ngo Dinh] Nhu and some of the family of Diem were the bad guys in all of this, because he had fared very well under Diem earlier, in promotions and all that sort of thing. And they were of a common mind in trying to win the allegiance of those very substantial paramilitary forces, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai and the Binh Xuyen, and did fairly well.

So here, I guess, from Big Minh's perspective, Diem had found a way to develop a *modus vivendi* with these other religious groups, but not the Buddhists.

G: And they, after all, were by far the largest.

S: By far the largest, as a religious force, but not necessarily a political force.

G: Do you recall General Harkins' reaction when you informed him that the coup was under way?

S: Yes. He was distressed, I mean, very distressed. After all, he was accredited to Diem, and he had the very correct perspective that we were going to lose a hell of a lot more than we stood to gain, that we were on the right track and we were now very definitely sidetracked. Sadness.

Did you ever have a chance to interview him?

G: Yes.

S: Good. Well, I hope I'm reflecting fairly accurately his view on this one.

G: How did the Vietnamese react, in your observation?

S: Very hard to tell. There was certainly no euphoria in the streets.

G: What are we to make of the stories of joyous crowds and so on that were in the papers?

S: I don't know. I sure as hell don't remember that. You might have gotten an instantaneous reaction that the lid was off and maybe the war was over, maybe a feeling that this somehow represented freedom from restrictions, from curfews, from something else. But it was soon replaced, whatever it was. Anyhow, I don't remember a euphoria as such.

G: How did your job change with the new regime? What new responsibilities did this impose upon you?

S: Well, it didn't change the dimensions of my job, particularly. I guess our first reaction was, will we now have a more vigorous prosecution of the military effort, now that we've got the overriding political uncertainties of who was in charge behind us? There were the pronouncements, of course, from the new regime, that we're going to get on with the problem. But they were also then faced with the problem of replacing a hell of a lot of ambassadors, and province chiefs, and changing the leadership of the internal security forces and so forth. Very shortly thereafter at a conference at CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific Command], as I recall: Are there new programs now that this is behind us? And we can provide more aid to this new government? And we did augment the aid? [Robert] McNamara made a trip there; I guess he was there in both November and January. I was plugging for, as I said, the district advisory detachments, which we started out first on a trial basis: one with a special forces element; one with a regular straight military advisory detachment, to find out what was going on. But we found early on that there was, in fact, a retrograde in the status of the provinces appearing on most of our reports, and

whether that was simply reflecting what had been the true situation, or whether it was in fact a deterioration, I suppose is a moot question. All that's a long time ago.

But then in early 1964, of course, we began to be confronted with larger engagements in the country, which struck a new and ominous note to the size and dimension of the task in front of us. But there is no question about it, that the security in the countryside started on a steady downhill slope from the late fall of 1963 onward, right into the time--and of course, it was the background for all those agonizing decisions to increase the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, leading to the positioning of the air defense capabilities, and then successively the marines in Da Nang and the 173rd in the Bien Hoa area, and then the continuing buildup. We were building up the advisory detachments, of course, from the time of Diem's overthrow right on through.

G: When did the contingency planning begin for the deployment of American units?

S: In the spring of 1965?

G: That late?

S: Yes.

G: Was there no logistic preparation before that time?

S: Well, there were a number of things going on throughout that whole period, of course; the improvement of our ability to offload and throughput assistance of the Vietnamese themselves; the continuation of the road building projects; POL [petroleum, oil, and lubricants?] capabilities; the improvement of air bases, that sort of thing, which of course served a dual purpose, both for the use of the Vietnamese forces themselves, and the infrastructure that would support U.S. forces. And we brought in, of course, an increasing

number of helicopter units to support the Vietnamese forces, primarily. We were upgrading the types of units, on the one hand. We had a U.S. Army support element there that was responsible for the special forces that were in country. responsible for the aviation units. responsible for the intelligence units that we were bringing in. I've forgotten when we built the expeditionary airfield at Chu Lai. That was obviously a preparation. I won a case of whiskey from [Victor H.] Brute Krulak on that one, too.

G: How was that, sir?

S: He was convinced that we could do it a lot sooner than we were able to do it. But I'd walked over the ground, and I knew, as an engineer, how much subsoil preparation we'd have to make. So I won that one.

G: Why did they name it Chu Lai? Do you know that story? I'd heard that that was the Vietnamese pronunciation for Krulak.

S: It may be. I remember that; I think that's probably correct, although it may be apocryphal.

We had discussed the pros and cons of U.S. forces. Of course, we had successfully increased the U.S. Air Force presence in the area, to support the periodic raids, if you will, the air raids into North Vietnam.

G: This would have been February 1965?

S: Well, earlier than that. I don't remember when we first had our 34A raids.

G: I think the contingency planning for those was December 1963.

S: Oh yes, but I mean I don't remember when we conducted the first cross-DMZ [demilitarized zone] strike. It was sometime in 1964, if I'm not mistaken.

But I think we all realized instinctively that we might have to cross the Rubicon on

U.S. presence in country, and U.S. mission in country of ground forces, and it was a very agonizing appraisal throughout the whole thing for us.

G: Were you involved in that debate over the advisability of committing U.S. forces?

S: Well, yes, because I guess at that time I was the chief of staff, so I was very much involved in the introduction of U.S. forces, of course as was Bill DePuy, as the J-3.

G: What were the terms of that debate?

S: The first one, of course, was mission, and as reflected in some of those cables you gave me--where do you put the forces and can you have discreet missions, once you're on the ground? I think we all had an abhorrence of the idea of U.S. forces being intermingled with the Vietnamese population as such, for what that might entail in civilian casualties and the political implications of all of that. Of course, there was some discussion of why even into South Vietnam; why not North Vietnam? But that's war-widening, for one thing, and there was the concern that to what avail would it be to invade North Vietnam if South Vietnam comes apart at the goddamned seams? And the first requirement seemed to be to do what we could to insure the stability, the continuance, the endurance, of the South Vietnamese government.

So among the other things that you looked at was, can you put these people either on the DMZ or in the Highlands or whatever, but that you had the logistic nightmare, the security of routes and communication and all of that. Can you put them, as we did initially, in little enclaves with a strictly defensive mission? But what's the impact of that on troop morale and so forth, if they're simply holding a perimeter, where the efficacy of the perimeter depends on the efficacy of the outlying defenses, which would be Vietnamese

forces? And the whole command and control responsibility: do you have a single leadership? Can you forge a binational agreement of a single chain of command? We didn't want to put our forces under the Vietnamese, for one thing. But if you put the Vietnamese under us, do we take over then overall responsibility for the security of South Vietnam? Tough questions, all of them. And finally: do you need to do that, or are there alternatives? And clearly the one alternative was, can we develop a totally viable Vietnamese fighting force? Obviously you have less chance of doing that if you have it subordinated to us.

And can you do both? Well, as it turned out, once we made the decision--and I think we had to make that decision. In the last analysis the security situation in 1965 was such that the only way you could stem this tide, based on our intelligence appreciation as to what was happening in the Highlands, was to make a major investment of U.S. forces. And we did, but I think unhappily, until [General Creighton] Abrams began to right the ship, that--we put in U.S. forces, and we had such a single-minded emphasis on that that we put in idling gear the efforts that we were making to improve the Vietnamese, in terms of equipage and training and so forth. So we had a hiatus there of about two years, where the Vietnamese armed forces really played second fiddle to the deployment, employment, support of the U.S. ground forces.

Max Taylor's cables, you know, that you let me read, and I had forgotten--some of them I hadn't seen, I guess, some of them I had seen--he laid out these pros and cons in, I thought, a very effective way, and I think he had a pretty clear appreciation of that thing, is that we'd better be sure of what we wanted to do and how we wanted to do it before we

moved too fast. Then we didn't move fast enough.

G: Let me pursue your last remark: "Then we didn't move fast enough." What--

S: In my view, and that's just one soldier's view, that when we made the decision in the summer of 1965 to really get in there, those fateful decisions that were made back here, you had at least two chiefs who said we ought to mobilize. And we didn't. In my recommendation, if the chiefs had gone--not public--but if one or more of the chiefs said, "Look, this is not something we do as a sideshow," that we ought to totally mobilize the United States, call up the reserves, it might have made a difference; it might have made a difference. But the decision that you could do this thing, and do it fairly quickly, was just basically wrong. And I guess the President decided on good advice and counsel that this was something that a slightly augmented regular establishment could handle by itself, and it wouldn't involve the public as a whole. I believe that if we'd mobilized, not a partial mobilization but had a total mobilization of the country, to say this is a big show, we wanted to--it would have made a difference, in my view, in public perceptions of what Vietnam was all about, and our stake in this whole thing. It would have brought, in my view, the issue home quicker and engaged more of the people of the United States than it did, rather than have this thing go on on a half-speed basis for a considerable thing. But again, it was an appreciation of what we were up against. And in my calculus, a very big country, the number one country looking at this thing as a limited investment for a limited time, but facing an opponent for whom it was total war, at whatever cost, for how long it took: unequal contest.

Graham Martin said to me when I reported into Bangkok in August, "Well, Dick,

now that the army and marines are in there, how long is it going to take? One year?" I said, "Ten." That was the summer of 1965. Well, it took ten, but with a different result than I had in envisaged.

Tape 2 of 2, Side 1

This is pretty rambling.

G: No, it's fine. On balance, my impression is that General, then-Ambassador, Taylor did not favor the commitment of U.S. units. Did he talk to you about that?

S: I don't think it's quite as simple as that. He recognized that we had a mission to save South Vietnam from communist domination. He recognized that the forces available to South Vietnam might be inadequate to that task, for a mission's success, and that there might have to therefore be U.S. involvement. But it was important, I think, for the same reasons that pertained in 1952-1953, to look at the total picture before you decided on that and just not move in willy-nilly to do it. And because he did, of course, support the introduction of the marines and the 173rd, he was shocked to find that the decision on the 173rd that he hadn't been aware of. That's an interesting exchange of cables there; I had forgotten about that particular one. But it was obviously some breakdown in communications between Westy and Taylor at that juncture, and I'd forgotten that one. But he wanted to be damned sure, you know, that we'd thought this thing through, and just not piecemealed in without a consensus.

Let's see, Taylor left, didn't he--when did Taylor leave?

G: He left in about June of 1965, I think.

S: Yes. And Lodge came back.

G: That' s right.

S: And I remember discussing with--we all discussed with Taylor from time to time, too, where do you put your forces, and what is their mission? Certainly you can say that Taylor was much more cautious about U.S. intervention in a ground combat role than Westy was.

But I remember going up and talking to Lew [Lewis William] Walt when he came ashore, where both of us were somewhat concerned about how's this all going to work, you know. The marines, despite the distinguished record that CINCPAC had talked about, well, Lew Walt said, "This is--" he was concerned about mission, and the rather alien environment in which he had been moving, and rules of engagement, all those very difficult things. We spent a lot of time in the spring of 1965, because we--

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

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