

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 21, 1971

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM H. SULLIVAN

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Washington, D.C.

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M: Let's begin by identifying you, sir. You're William Sullivan.

Through the major part of the Johnson Administration you served as ambassador to Laos, but during 1946 you were in town in the State Department concerned with various aspects of Indochina policy, including being the chairman of the Interagency Task Force on Vietnam early in 1964.

When did you first have any contact with President Johnson?

S: I guess that was probably in 1962.

M: After he was already vice president?

S: When he was vice president. I spent from June 1961 until July 1962 pretty much in Geneva on the Laos talks, and I think the first time I met him was at a National Security Council meeting in the White House shortly after that. I can't remember what the subject was, but I remember meeting him on that occasion. I did meet him then subsequently, socially I think, at Averell Harriman's house and saw him from time to time primarily [on such occasions].

M: Your official contact wasn't very great though, as vice president?

S: No, I had no contact with him officially before he became vice

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president. I don't believe I ever met him when he was senator.

M: As someone who was there at Geneva through the Laos discussions, pretty much all the way, did he ever sit down and talk at length with you about that particular convention and settlement?

S: No, I don't recall ever having any discussions with him on that subject.

M: Did you have anything to do with his trip to Vietnam when he was vice president?

S: No, that took place while I was in Geneva, I believe, 1961?

M: Yes, it would have been while you were there.

What was your job in the department at the time that President Kennedy was assassinated?

S: When President Kennedy was assassinated, I was with Averell Harriman then as his special assistant. He was under secretary of state and I was special assistant to the under secretary. We had a very broad charter. We did not have a charter; this was worldwide responsibility.

M: You were not specializing in Indochina affairs at that time?

S: No. As a matter of fact, the day before the assassination we had just come back from Latin America. We'd been down in Latin America. I recall it was one of the habits that Governor Harriman always had to keep the Vice President abreast of foreign affairs. When he came back, he always telephoned him and gave him a report of what we had done. I remember that day he asked me to get hold of the Vice President, and we discovered he was in Texas and realized that there

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was an hour's difference in time. We thought we wouldn't get him right then, because it would have been breakfast time, and we never did make contact.

I might say, now that I think of it, I did have another oblique relationship with the Vice President, although it didn't involve a personal encounter. He, you may recall, in 1961 was given additional responsibility by President Kennedy with respect to foreign affairs. And I think it was right after he came back from his trip to Vietnam, he asked the Under Secretary, Mr. [Chester] Bowles, to assign a foreign service officer to his staff. Apparently he was given some names, and he chose mine as being the foreign service officer to be his special assistant. I was in Geneva at this time, so they telephoned me from Washington. It was very tempting, but I felt that I was pretty much obligated in Geneva, so it was arranged that my name was withdrawn. So I nearly had a very much closer relationship with him.

M: Right. How did he choose your name? Did you ever know? Did someone [recommend you]?

S: No, I suppose he was given a dossier. I think Chester Bowles had recommended two or three names and he chose mine.

M: I know someone was subsequently appointed in that position.

You've mentioned that one of Governor Harriman's jobs at the time you were working for him was to report regularly to the Vice President. At that time, did Mr. Johnson seem to really care about these reports on foreign affairs, or was that a subject that

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concerned him much?

S: Oh, yes, as a regular participant, you see, in the National Security Council meetings, he definitely had to keep himself abreast to what was going on. So he did have this foreign service officer assigned to his staff who gave him a daily briefing and, of course, he got the intelligence briefings. Whenever there was any development of any significance we made sure from Harriman's office, and I'm sure that Rusk did the same thing in his office, that the Vice President was informed, because he was not in the normal, regular channel of information. In other words, if we were sending stuff to the President, it would go through Mac Bundy to President Kennedy, and we'd have to be sure that he [Johnson] was kept in the picture.

M: The image, when he came to the presidency, was of a man that was a great master of a lot of domestic detail, but really didn't know much about foreign affairs. So you think that's probably not an accurate statement?

S: Well, he certainly was kept informed. I'm not sure that it took the primary rank in his interest at that time, because he certainly was of course much more active in domestic legislation and matters on the Hill.

M: Joh Leacacas credits you with having tried to dissuade Robert McNamara from making his statement, later used so frequently against him, that he would be out of Vietnam successfully by the end of 1964 or early 1965. Do you recall the circumstances that led to the episode?

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S: Yes. I think, until either Dean Rusk, or Bob McNamara--or I guess Max Taylor was a participant--record their version of the event, it will still be a little bit fuzzy. Because it happened this way: we went out in the fall of 1963, I guess it was. I was assigned from the Department of State to be the department's representative on a trip that McNamara and Taylor and others took to Vietnam to have a look into the situation. The drafting of our report was a composite affair. We were each given certain sections to draft, and my particular section had to do with the internal political situation. But then we all massaged the final effort, and I took exception to a section that had appeared in Max Taylor's, General Taylor's, contribution which indicated that we ought to be able to be pulling people out in 1965. I thought that was a little optimistic. This is while we were still in Saigon. I went to McNamara and said I thought this should come out. He agreed to go talk it over with Taylor and he went across the hall. He came back and said, "Okay, we're going to drop that." It was dropped from the written version of the report we made to the President.

We came back here and went immediately to the White House or within two or three hours after our landing, made the report with no mention of this feature. But the press, of course, was very much interested in what we were doing. So it was decided that there should be some little statement communique put out. After the meeting, President Kennedy took Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, Bundy, and himself into the Oval Office, and they produced this little statement that

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came out. The statement, surprisingly enough, had back in it again something about getting some forces out in 1965.

Now, at the time, I just thought this was perhaps Max Taylor getting his view back on the record, but in retrospect and in view of things that have been said later by Senator [Mike] Mansfield and others about what President Kennedy's intentions were, this may have reflected more of President Kennedy's thinking than I was aware at the time. So those few that went into the Oval Room with him are the ones that have the answer, and until their histories are more on the public record, I don't think we will know what the facts are.

M: Did your pessimism reflect pretty much the opinion of the people who were familiar with the problem in the State Department at that time?

S: I think so, yes. By and large, our State Department observers, our foreign service officers, were less ebullient than the military about the feasibility of getting this sort of military action all wrapped up in short order. We felt this was going to be a long, grinding sort of thing, and we shouldn't create any illusions or delusions in the American public that it was going to be something that could be taken care of very quickly.

M: What led to your appointment as the chairman of the Interagency Task Force on Vietnam early in 1964?

S: Well, a certain amount of personality questions and other issues.

M: By that, do you mean that it was to bypass Roger Hilsman?

S: I think that, to some extent, that was the case. Roger had apparently become not the most popular figure in the military, either in the

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Defense Department or in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I think the view was that they should put the Vietnam operation under a separate aegis and have that institutionally centered here in the Department of State, but made interdepartmental to try to avoid at least the public reflection of differences and squabbles that were going on at that time. The two people who made the recommendation were McNamara and Mac Bundy. They recommended that this be set up as a separate interdepartmental guiding, hearing committee, and that I be made head of it and be named special assistant to the Secretary of State. They took it out of the province of Roger Hilsman here in this department and also found a formula for bringing more close collaboration amongst the various departments in the government.

M: What was the job of that group supposed to be specifically?

S: Well, interestingly enough, when I was appointed or when it was agreed that I should do this, I was not one of the greatest proponents of this move; I didn't think it was the smartest way to do business. But I went over to the White House and Mac Bundy took me in to see the President, and the President asked me the same question: "Why do you think this thing will function better this way than on a straight line organization?" And I said, "Mr. President, I don't." (Laughter) And Mac Bundy sort of fell off the chair, because this is the way he'd been telling the President it would work. I said, "I frankly think that this sort of thing would function much better if you just kept it on the line, but

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since you seem to have some squabbles amongst various people in your administration, I think I can at least function to keep those from getting into the press by getting those all headed off before they become real disputes." That, I think, was the main function and the main value of it: that we were able to get everybody's views together and iron out any differences before they became institutionally in conflict with each other.

M: Were these differences mainly what you'd call tactical differences, or were there some really serious doubts that we ought to be engaging any more deeply in Vietnam at all by that time?

S: I think they were both tactical differences and personality differences. I don't think there was any major difference about the fundamentals. That is to say, I don't think there was anyone who was seriously questioning whether the United States should undertake some obligations to check the North Vietnamese control of South Vietnam. Subsequently, George Ball did raise fundamental issues, but really only after he began to have serious doubts about the tactical question, about whether we were going to be able to succeed. I think he proceeded from a very pragmatic base, and I think he himself has said this in the commentary he made more recently. So there wasn't any great, violent disaffection with the thrust of the policy; there were lots of scraps about the way in which it should be carried out. And, as I say, there was this personality problem which centered largely around Roger Hilsman's difficulties with some of his uniformed friends across the river.

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- M: Mike Forrestal was the White House member of that task force, wasn't he?
- S: Yes. I can't remember everybody on the task force, but the Defense Department was represented by John McNaughton; Mike Forrestal was White House; here in the State Department, it was Joe [Joseph A.] Mendenhall and he headed up a working group which was also inter-departmental. The Joint Chiefs of Staffs representative, I think, was Buck [Rollen H.] Anthus at that time, General Anthus, and later became . . . Lord, I can't remember who succeeded him.
- M: Those are all matters of record. Did the White House view as represented by Forrestal seriously differ from either the Defense Department or the State Department representative views?
- S: No, there was a continuity. I think Mike Forrestal and the National Security Council staff shared some of the more pessimistic estimates that we had as distinct from some of the more optimistic views that were expressed by people like General [Victor] Krulak.
- M: Was one of the first objects of business of that committee the development of contingency bombing targets?
- S: I think that task had begun before the formation of the committee.
- M: I see.
- S: My memory on dates on this gets pretty jumbled, but I have a fairly distinct view that that original establishment of potential targets had begun well before that; in fact, begun in the Kennedy Administration.
- M: But there was one of the items of business of this task force as well still?

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- S: We inherited the custody of the catalogue and, I guess, would make changes to it or bring it up to date or make any variations. I frankly don't remember that as being a major item of business of this particular committee.
- M: I suppose the basic question really is and has grown out of publication of the so-called Pentagon Papers: Was it your impression that you and your task force in the early months of 1964 when you were chairing it were making basic decisions that predicated then future actions? In other words, were you reaching decisions that were hard, or were you just doing contingency planning?
- S: Very definitely on the contingency side. We were attempting to grapple with the whole question of what means we could adduce that would bring North Vietnam to the negotiating table. The prime purpose of our policy was to try to get the North Vietnamese to negotiate and during the early part of my group's existence, we were concentrating more on efforts in the South to get that to come about. Now in the spring of 1964, we had of course constant suggestions by Walt Rostow--who was not at that stage in the White House; he was still here in State--that we really ought to look into some bombing operations in the North. As the situation in the South began to deteriorate, and we began to realize there were more regular North Vietnamese forces coming into the South, people did start giving much more serious looks to the bombing operation in the North.
- M: This is in the spring of 1964?
- S: Spring of 1964. We had some war games which were conducted in the

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Pentagon, but which were departmental-wide, interdepartmental-wide, government-wide. We had people from the White House. Mac Bundy was a participant, General Taylor and, I think, Secretary Rusk. I'm not sure he was there for the final . . . But anyway, we had some very detailed studies that were done through the war game technique, and we had in just about everybody whose views were going to matter and whose involvement would be sought. And we certainly derived from that a couple of conclusions: One, that any bombing campaign would not be a quick, easy, clean operation, that the North Vietnamese could absorb a great deal and for a great length of time. And the second conclusion was that if we set out on this course, we were going to have a great deal of unhappiness as this dragged on, not only from foreign allies and friends, but also domestically here in the United States, and especially from the Congress. For this reason, we did feel that there was going to be a major need for bringing the Congress aboard in one form or another, probably through some form of resolution.

M: Was there equal concern, during the time that you were developing these possibilities for getting these negotiations started, with what our position in such negotiations would be? That is, a really detailed, negotiated position, a bargaining position?

S: No, we hadn't moved toward a detailed negotiating position. Dean Rusk, as you may recall, put out the Fourteen Points somewhere--I can't remember in what year.

M: Not that early, I don't think.

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S: But they represented the essence of the degree to which our thinking had developed at that time; and I think if you read those Fourteen Points, you'll see that they hadn't really gotten down into sharp, precise details. The view that prevailed was pretty much the one that was summed up in Dean Rusk's persistent statement, that what we were trying to do was to get them to leave their neighbors alone. In other words, the presumption was that we were going to get the North Vietnamese to get back where they belonged on the other side of the 17th parallel and that South Vietnam would develop without any communist involvement or communist interference.

M: In other words, you were thinking in terms of what would amount to what you might call victory in a negotiating situation.

S: Well, we were thinking in terms of frustrating the North Vietnamese military success in South Vietnam, yes.

M: You said that you had consideration of a potential congressional resolution. I believe you and Mike Forrestal are credited with having drafted one of those in the spring of 1964. How did that occur? Was that just part of your committee's work, task force work?

S: That, frankly, was one of the outcomes of this war game: that we felt that if and when we went to bombing, we would have to have this, and then it became later part of the committee's work when we were putting together the contingency elements for potential bombing. We put together a pretty thorough contingency plan which tried to take into account all the aspects of it, including the idea of the need for congressional resolution. John McNaughton was the man who honchoed

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most of the work in the Pentagon on the military side of this. But it was done within the framework of my committee.

M: Was there any presidential contact at the time you were drafting this resolution in the spring?

S: I don't know whether Mac Bundy ever discussed it with the President or not, but certainly I had none.

M: How close was the ultimate resolution that Congress passed after Tonkin Gulf to the draft that you and Forrestal worked on several months earlier?

S: The operative paragraphs were similar, but we had quite a bit of preambular stuff in it which all dropped out because, frankly, ours envisioned a congressional debate and the going in cold without the incident of the President having to go in and explain what the situation was. Therefore, we had several preambular paragraphs. I haven't seen a copy of it since 1964, so I don't recall exactly. But I do know that it was quite a bit longer, just textually, than the ultimate Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

M: About this same time, the contact arranged through the Canadian, J. Blair Seaborn, took place, and I believe you and Chester Cooper were the briefing officers for that mission. What did you understand the Seaborn mission to be trying to accomplish?

S: Well, Chester Cooper and I were instructed to fly up to Canada and speak with the Canadian government. I believe that it was preceded by either a message from President Johnson to the Prime Minister, or something from Rusk to . . . I can't remember what the preliminary

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groundwork was. But anyway, we were expected, and the Canadians knew what we were coming about. I wrote out the instructions to myself on this, and I think they've since appeared in the Pentagon Papers that have been in the New York Times. (Laughter) So they pretty much outlined what we wanted to get from the Canadians: a willingness to have their representative on the ICC discuss with Hanoi and the officials in Hanoi the fact that the United States was quite willing to negotiate with them and that we were willing to seek a diplomatic solution to the war. Implicit in this, of course, particularly as the mission developed, was the indication that we were also prepared in the absence of any negotiation to increase the military quotient that we were putting in to help defend South Vietnam.

So it was consistent with this general pattern that our whole approach in the spring of 1964, into the summer of 1964, was to try to get the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table.

M: The Times analyst makes it seem as if the emphasis on the Seaborn visit was on the military threat rather than on the attempt to get negotiations started. You seem to imply that it was more the balanced operation, maybe with emphasis the other way.

S: I think the emphasis, in all fairness, was the other way. I can say that with some authority, because I wrote the instructions on the thing.

M: Did you debrief Seaborn after his visits?

S: Now let's see. I was traveling back and forth to Vietnam quite a bit at this time. I saw Seaborn in Canada, of course, and I saw

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the other officials of the Canadian Ministry of External Affairs, who were laying all this on. The next time I saw Seaborn was in Saigon. I can't remember whether that was while I was there on a visit or whether that was when I was suddenly assigned there. On July 4, as you know, President Johnson picked up Max Taylor and Alex Johnson and myself and threw us on out there to Saigon. I suspect that I did not see Seaborn until I arrived in Saigon, so that I didn't do any direct debriefing. He debriefed through reporting cables back to his government, which in turn informed us.

M: In talking with him at later times, did he have a clear idea as to what his job had been, and did he think anything had come of it beyond what our government accepted? In other words, did he think there was any forthcoming response from Hanoi?

S: No, he was a very thorough professional and a very objective fellow; he knew exactly what his job was and his reporting of course was that he ran into a pretty hard-nosed reaction up there. He reported that, basically, to us; that was his own personal description of the situation, as I recall it from my talks with him. I saw him quite a bit socially in Saigon during the summer when I was there.

M: Now, you were, as you say, picked up on July 4 and thrown out there. What was the background of that sudden move?

S: I'm not quite sure. And again, you'd have to ask this question specifically of President Johnson, I think. My estimate of it in hindsight would be that he was getting sort of fed up with this whole damned Vietnam proposition and he felt that Max Taylor was sort

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of the brains of the whole idea of limited wars, counter-insurgencies. He was not entirely pleased with the fact that there were still continuing dichotomies between our military and our civil establishment in Saigon itself. And when Cabot Lodge decided to resign to come back here and contest Barry Goldwater for the Republican nomination, this opened up an opportunity for him to put somebody into Saigon who could have competence both in the military side and, he felt from his personal knowledge of Max Taylor, in the civilian, diplomatic side as well. So that was one thing.

The other thing, I think he just wanted to sort of get the whole problem as far away from him as he could; get it out there to Saigon and maybe the people would resolve it out there, and he could get on to the things which clearly were, in his mind, the matters of his greatest calling, which I think were the domestic, the Great Society, the social, civil rights and other [inaudible] that he was working on. So my general feeling was that he was looking on this as sort of a way that he would have to spend less time [on Vietnam]. I know that the amount of time that he had to spend on Vietnam must have been terribly distracting to him, and it was all so damned inconclusive.

I remember just before we went, Bob McNamara gave a reception at his house where the President came and there was a lot of kidding and joshing about who was going to go out there, and whom he was going to send additional to us and so forth. Bob Kennedy's name, of course, had been mentioned, and several others were all getting some of the Johnson wit being bounced off them on this occasion.

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M: How did you get on that team? Do you know?

S: Yes, from a number of years of association with Max Taylor. It may sound pretty cliquish if you get all of it. Max Taylor and Alex Johnson were language students together in Tokyo before the war: Max as a military officer; Alex as a foreign service officer. In 1962, when I came back from Geneva, I had been separated from my family of course all this time and was taking a little leave with my family over on the beach at Rehobeth. Max Taylor was told by President Kennedy--he was at that stage, you may recall, special military adviser in the White House--that the President wanted to make him chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Taylor had been not too long prior to that in Europe, so he felt pretty comfortable about that. He didn't feel very comfortable about Asia, and he felt he wanted to go take a trip around Asia. He also felt that if he was taking a trip around Asia to the various countries, he should have somebody from the State Department with him, a foreign service officer. So he called his old friend Alex Johnson and said he wanted somebody for this purpose, and Alex knew that I was here and that I hadn't really settled into anything else. I don't know whether he knew I was on vacation with my family, but anyway he called me over at the beach and grabbed me. I had to break off the family vacation and I went on this trip with Taylor.

M: And Johnson? Did he go, too?

S: No, Johnson didn't go; just those, and probably an admiral--can't think of his name right now--a naval officer who was Taylor's aide.

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That's how I first got to know Max. Of course, I got to know him very well during the whole Vietnam period when I was working and we were going back and forth on these trips together.

When he was given the word to go take this job in Vietnam, he conceived of his functions out there organizationally quite differently than a normal ambassador would. First of all, he wrote himself his own instructions--

M: That's convenient.

S: --which he got the President to sign, which gave him command not only over the diplomatic and political side, but also over General Westmoreland. Of course, he was considerably senior to Westy, and Westy had been his commandant of cadets when he was the superintendent of West Point.

So Max's idea was that he was going to have an organization in which he would be looking at it strictly from his military background experience. He would be the commander, and Alex Johnson, his old friend, would be the deputy commander; then he wanted somebody to be chief of staff, and that was his idea for me: I would be the chief of staff in this. My problem was that I was already on notice that I was to go as ambassador to Laos.

M: You already knew that by that time?

S: Yes. And Leonard Unger, the ambassador in Laos, was already preparing to come out about that time. So when Taylor asked me if I would do this, I said I obviously would much rather go to Laos, but if I could be of help, maybe I could come out for a short time till he got everything organized and got on his feet. So we agreed that

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I go for about a month. It was about six months before I could finally get out of there.

M: I was going to say! (Laughter)

S: But it's a long, just a personal relationship we had.

M: What kind of contacts did the President maintain with this, sort of, as you say, different diplomatic set-up that at that time Ambassador Taylor set up? Did the President remain closely in contact with Max Taylor while he was ambassador to Saigon, closer than normal embassy relationship?

S: Yes, he set up the arrangement then that there would be a I think it was weekly report from Taylor directly to the President. In addition to all the other normal reporting we did from there, there would be a direct report to the President. I think it was a weekly report, and it was frankly in that vehicle that Taylor put his prime recommendations and reporting. He worked on that very assiduously and very carefully himself each time it came around for preparation.

M: Was the embassy there in agreement that the situation in Saigon was deteriorating very rapidly from midsummer 1964 on through the balance of that year?

S: Oh, well, you couldn't be there without having any other conclusion. It was really the bottom of course; the summer of 1964 was an absolute shambles. Public law and order broke down in Saigon itself. We had riots in the streets. The government disintegrated. There were some days when we couldn't find the government. So that was about the nadir. And that was obviously a reason why, once I got

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out there, it was impossible for me to leave until it got a little more stabilized.

M: Of course, that was during the period that a lot of additional planning was going on here, for example, what the Times said was a consensus that bombing would have to begin, which was allegedly reached in September. Was it your understanding in Saigon that a consensus had been reached that bombing was going to start at some future time?

S: No. For example, there was not a consensus in Saigon. It may be something of a surprise for you to know that the one that was holding out most against it was Westmoreland. He was not in favor of bombing the North. That may to some extent reflect of course that he felt that, given more forces in the South, he could do the job in the South, but he was by no means convinced during the whole summer of 1964. And it's my definite impression that back here in Washington no such agreements had been reached. Certainly, we had no inkling of it. When the decisions came to do what Max Taylor used to call tit-for-tat, when we came to do that as a result of the Tonkin Gulf incident, when we hit the fuel and torpedo boat installations at Vinh, that was very definitely an ad hoc decision. We didn't regard that as being within the context of any overall consensus that had all developed.

M: Was that a unanimous recommendation from the mission there?

S: Yes. From the mission, well . . . (Laughter)

M: I'm talking about the new one.

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- S: This was going on in the middle of the night, as you probably remember and we came over to Taylor's house. Taylor and Johnson were sharing a house together, and Westy and I came over. I can't remember who else. About five or six of us sat in this little room, I suppose, about two or three o'clock in the morning. I can't remember what time it was. Anyway, we had radio contact and telephone contact there, and, from that group, we made the agreed recommendation and sent it on back immediately. So, insofar as we represented the consensus, I guess we did, yes, since almost everybody else out there worked for us.
- M: At that particular time, was there any question in your minds at all regarding the reality of the second attack?
- S: My own mind on that, I think, has to be colored by an experience I had myself in World War II where at Normandy we were in the picket line there just after we'd established the beachhead, and a couple of German torpedo boats, W boats came around from Cherbourg. I was on a destroyer and we were sent out to engage. Black night, pitch dark, and we tangled with these boats for almost an hour. A good half of that hour, I suspect, we were tangling with our own wake and with shell marks. In other words, when you get in such a low profile target as a torpedo boat, particularly in anything of a swelling sea, and then particularly if you've got a ship that's moving with any speed and doing any turning, your radar signals get very, very confused. So I was fully prepared to accept the fact that they had had initial contact, but they'd gotten into this sort of churning pattern and that later on they got confused. I have never had any

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doubts that they had a contact. How thoroughly the attack was pressed home, I don't know.

M: That's not important. . .

S: But the degree of confusion, in not only the young skipper's mind, but particularly the mind of this young radar man who'd never been probably engaged in a military action before in his life doesn't surprise me at all, because I've seen and participated in exactly the same circumstances.

M: That's an interesting account, and I'm glad to get someone who has; because they seemed so certain of what they say, and I'm sure they believe what they say.

S: Well, I recall this one in Normandy, where at one stage we had very sharp reactions or reports of something coming right behind us, and it was quite clear that it was our own wake that we were churning up, because we were in a tight circle. That sort of thing, I think, is what entered into and gave all the confusion of the subsequent reports that then caused people to doubt it and which had been so much magnified in this book, Truth Is the First Casualty.

M: : Did you have by this time clear intercept that the attack had been ordered by the North Vietnamese, or did that come later?

S: No, we were informed of that, I think, during the period that we were sitting, making our recommendations.

M: At least, you knew that the order had been given.

S: We knew that the attack was intended. We didn't know whether it was carried off or not then.

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M: What about then through that six-month period? Do you believe that the mission, meaning Taylor and Johnson and yourself, had adequate input into the considerations that were going on back here in Washington?

S: Insofar as we knew what was going on back here, I think we definitely did. As I said, I think it was the President's hope to get most of the decision-making and the hassling all worked out there in Saigon and not have so much of it on his plate back here.

M: Insofar as you knew? Did you not know what was going on back here?

S: Well, I say insofar as I know, now, even. I hadn't read all these Pentagon Papers myself until recently. So, how much some of the cogitation that is contained in some of these memos that Bill Bundy did and Walt Rostow did and others did at that time, how much they represent matters that were directly entering into the President's decision-making, I don't know. But I think we were and feel we were in very close touch and that he certainly was looking to Taylor and the mission out there as his primary point of operation.

M: You said you were already on the list to go to Laos as ambassador when you went out there. How did you get on that list? How did your name come up for that post?

S: Well, it was a fairly natural thing. I'd been so much involved in the Laos business in 1961-62. Then subsequently, in 1963, Harriman had sort of been Mr. Laos. And all decisions about Laos where nobody else really understood all the detail and the mess involved, that people usually threw up their hands and gave them to him to

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do which meant that I usually did it. So I'd been pretty much the Laos man here. We, at that stage, were in the habit of not keeping an ambassador any more than two years in Laos. Unger's two years were about up, and in the spring of 1964 he began sort of wiggling his antenna and indicating that he was waiting for someone to take him out. I think Dean Rusk asked me if I would be willing and interested to go, and I said, "Yes."

M: Did you ever talk to the President about it at that time?

S: No, I don't think I ever did.

M: Or ever? Did you ever talk to the President about your going there?

S: I don't really have any recollection of having talked with him in advance of my leaving for Saigon. No.

M: You didn't get to write your own instructions and have him sign them?

S: No.. No, not at all. You know, there weren't all that many people eager and willing wanting to go to Laos, so it was less a question of being one of the chosen few and more a question of whether I was willing to take it on. I think the only contact I had was with Dean Rusk on it.

M: The bombing of Laotian infiltration routes apparently began in the spring of 1964. Did you have close relationship to that decision being made?

S: Yes.

M: Was that presidential?

S: Yes.

M: How did it come up? Did it come from the Vietnam task force or from

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a different [source]?

S: No. Well, my memory is not all that strong. The most vivid thing I recall about it was that the President was very much involved; and when the decision was made to send two flights of aircraft against this one gun position in the Plaine des Jarres that had shot down or shot up--I don't think the plane was actually shot down--one of our reconnaissance plans. Now again, I was making trips back and forth, and I recall seeing that reconnaissance plane at the airport at Don Muang in Thailand with the holes through it.

Then, when I came back here, it was pretty much the same cast of characters, that is to say McNamara and Taylor and so forth. So I'm not sure whether it came up in one of our reports back or how it came up. But I do recall that it was decided to fly operations against this antiaircraft gun emplacement in the Plaine des Jarres.

The Air Force, of course, had photos of it, because they had been making reconnaissance flights over there. As I say, the most vivid recollection I have is the first flight went, and within very short order, a day or so, we got back the photos showing where the bombs had hit. They had come pretty close and obviously had done some damage to the antiaircraft installation. The Air Force was very proud of them. They had them all laid out on the table over in the Cabinet Room over in the White House.

Then the second flight went, and we expected a similar show. And there was a sort of silence; and the President got somewhat impatient about where this second [hit]. So finally the Air Force

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came over a few days later, very sheepishly, and they had another set of photos, and they showed another pattern of bombing on an anti-aircraft installation, but unfortunately it wasn't the same one. They had mistaken the target completely and gone about forty miles away and hit another anti-aircraft installation. I remember a certain amount of salty Texas words about the Air Force's great proficiency and accuracy. (Laughter)

M: Pinpoint bombing with surgical--

S: Pinpoint bombing, and they only missed it by forty miles.

M: Fairly close.

S: The thing was they were two old French-style forts and they were exactly the same design and they looked exactly the same from the air, but the guy had done his navigating wrong. I remember that was a rather ignominious start for the Air Force as a whole demonstration of how their capabilities to pinpoint bombing were inaccurate. The President had I can't remember what but I remember a few salty things to say.

M: Was that looked upon as a permanent policy at the time it was made, a permanent authority to bomb given targets in Laos regularly?

S: No, those particular ones were against, again, a retaliatory thing which was to try to preserve the understanding that we were going to keep reconnaissance planes up there keeping photo reconnaissance of what the North Vietnamese were doing.

M: Was there any opposition to that among, you say, the same case of players? Everyone agreed that was a necessary response?

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S: Everybody agreed that it was a little dicey. And of course, it was held secret. I don't think there was any public knowledge of this.

M: But the President personally gave the go-ahead on it?

S: Oh, yes, the President personally did. I recall being there when he did it, and I recall being there when these two photo read-outs were made. But other than that, my memory is a little vague as to the exact circumstances of who made the recommendation or how it was put together.

M: When did you actually go to Laos? In January of 1965?

S: No, I went there right after Thanksgiving in 1964. I think I arrived in early December. I think I presented my credentials on December 11. Either I presented credentials on December 11 or else I arrived on December 11.

M: Later, the news media would refer to our secret war in Laos. Was it already pretty well going on by the time you got there?

S: Oh, yes, the war had broken out again pretty much in 1963, when the communists tried to get the neutralists to try to absorb them in the Plaines des Jarres. When they refused to do that, then there was, you may remember, a young colonel assassinated, and then there was retaliation assassinating the foreign minister, and the whole thing broke down, and the fighting started there, in some measure. In 1963, it calmed down then because the neutralists were pushed off the Plaines des Jarres. But it began again in 1964 with more intensity. By the time I got there, there had been during the dry season of 1964, a fairly large military operation already taking

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place. So, it was active, but geographically rather confined. The American participation, in the air and otherwise, was quite limited.

M: How much control, as the ambassador, did you have over the American military activity?

S: Just about a hundred per cent, I think.

M: You were able to exercise that much control?

S: I think so, over--

M: It's a tribute to you, considering the different types you've got in a mission like that.

S: No, I think it's a combination of several events. One, Laos had been one of the horrible examples of failure to have coordinated operations in the period 1959-1960. It was one of the main reasons why President Kennedy put out that letter of his in 1961 which said that ambassadors could control the people in their mission. So I think there was a very acute awareness on the part of the other agencies, the CIA and the Defense people, that there would be a very sharp look at Laos in case it started to deteriorate again. The second thing was that I had been working so intimately with the bosses of all those people when I was back here, that is to say, I had been very closely working with John McCone, who was head of CIA, and with Bob McNamara, and with "Bus" [General Earle G. T.] Wheeler.

M: And they knew that?

S: They knew that I had closer connections to their bosses than they did themselves. But quite aside from those negative considerations,

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I inherited from Len Unger a group that had been working closely with each other. There was no great desire on the part of our military to get themselves involved in Laos, so it wasn't a question of having to restrain eager people who were trying to push for more than was going on. In fact, everything we did there we did most reluctantly as a government, and all our agencies are the manifestations of this. We had known from the immediate past experience that the whole damn thing was a very poor place in which to get militarily heavily engaged or get the prestige of the United States engaged. So we proceeded with caution. Everybody was quite willing to let the ambassador take the responsibility and the rap. (Laughter)

M: Is that why it was so tightly held, as far as secrecy's concerned?

S: No. I went into a long explanation of this with the Symington subcommittee which is publicly printed. You may want to take a look at that.

M: As long as it's on the record, that's fine.

S: I think if you look at the long testimony I had in Symington's committee . . .

M: As far as you were concerned, what we were doing was clearly with the permission of Souvanna's [Souvanna Phouma] government?

S: Oh, at the request, primarily. No, the basic thing I'd say in answer: we did not want to get the prestige of the United States committed irreversibly to a military operation. Therefore one that could be run on a semi-clandestine basis left us with more prospect

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for reversibility and therefore more flexibility for getting the whole thing back into the negotiated settlement that we thought we'd achieved in 1962. So the main purpose again on this was to try to preserve the frameworks of 1962 accords, not rupture them openly and blatantly, but keep moving back toward that direction. It's somewhat the same sort of syndrome, I guess, that I gave in the answer you asked me about Blair Seaborn and the Canadians. Our prime purpose was to get toward a negotiation rather than to tear this thing further apart. Certainly that was the view of anybody who had any sense who looked at Southeast Asia during all this period. I know it was President Johnson's and Secretary McNamara's and Secretary Rusk's view.

M: Were you kept plugged into the Vietnam situation while you were in Laos pretty well?

S: Yes. Of course, having been in Vietnam, I kept pretty close track. Taylor came up and visited me once. That caused a certain amount of ruffle and I think too much high profile. So from then on, we established an arrangement for meetings on a regular basis of Taylor and Graham Martin, who was the ambassador to Thailand, and myself, and Westmoreland. Then later we added Admiral [U.S.G.] Sharp from CINCPAC. So we had meetings regularly in which we tried to coordinate our whole Southeast Asia effort.

Then additionally I had a lot of direct cable traffic back and forth with Saigon. And, of course, as we always do in these areas, we included each other on addressee so that we all read each other's

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cables and traffic and were aware of what was going on. And I did a certain amount of visiting back and forth to Vietnam.

M: Did you attend major conferences such as Manila, and things of this nature?

S: I didn't go to Manila, no. But right after Manila, Bill Bundy came over to Laos to fill me in. I guess he made a circle of a few places, but he came to Laos.

M: Were you used as a channel for contact with the North Vietnamese through Laos?

S: Later. There was really no effective contact with the North Vietnamese until 1967.

M: Now let's see. After the long bombing pause I believe the North Vietnamese charge and you had some conversations. This was in January of 1966, perhaps.

S: Yes, I had conversations with him, social contact with him, I would say, certainly all through 1967; I suppose it went back as early as 1966. I don't recall. But they never really got anywhere. I mean we just each of us told the other what our governments point of view was. There was no direct effort being made of the type that I think that you're referring to. You know, the sort of thing we were doing through the Poles was with Rumania. No, we were not doing anything. We were not attempting anything like that with the North.

It was considered from time to time, and I got back here about every six months or sometimes because of conferences going on here,

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sometimes just for consultations with respect to Laos. Dean Rusk was always very much interested in the possibility of perhaps getting some sort of negotiation or some sort of diplomatic solution started in the Laos context and then spreading out. He always used to encourage me to try to get something going, but we never really got off the ground.

M: You would say definitely that any conversations you had at the end of that long bombing pause were not a forthcoming response by the North Vietnamese to open up . . .

S: No. As a matter of fact, I don't even remember; they were so superficial that I don't even remember that I had them. So if I did, that's the nature of them.

M: Did you see the President when you'd come back on these six months forays usually?

S: Usually, usually, just sort of a brief courtesy call. In fact, he'd usually just ask me if there was anything I needed out there.

M: What kind of channels, then, did you start in 1967?

S: Well, the North Vietnamese and I had been there, the charge and I had been there for some time. They sent back their ambassador about--well, I can't remember. I have to confess my calendar gets all jumbled in my mind over that time.

M: That's pretty accurate.

S: I think they sent the ambassador back for a spell. And I'm trying to think whether that was the spring of 1967 or when it was. Maybe not. It was for some sort of royal wedding. One of the royal

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siblings, king's daughter or son, son I guess, was getting married, and he chose that as an occasion to come back. The exact date of that, I can't remember. It was sometime in 1967. It was the first time I'd ever met him, of course, because he'd been absent since 1963 or 1964.

He was most affable and he left the impression that he was quite willing to talk with me, since by that time I'd been there long enough so that when we lined up in rank order, as we did on any of these protocol occasions with the King, I was always standing next to him.

M: That helps.

S: And this, of course, was obviously very conspicuous to everybody in the room, who would see the two ambassadors from these two arch enemies talking jovially with each other.

Anyway that seemed to set . . . He came over and had some conversations with the King obviously at that time. When he went back to Hanoi, they seemed to have left his charge d'affairs with the feeling that he had more freedom to talk with me. We used to get into discussions primarily about what opportunities there were for any negotiations and discussions. He very much followed the party line. But anyway, we had obviously a much more casual and useful contact than any other similar place in the world where Americans and North Vietnamese were represented. So it was for that reason that they used me, or used Vientiane as the channel for discussions on trying to set up the negotiations when the

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President came out with the bombing halt announcement in March of 1968.

M: You were not used, under Washington instructions, prior to that time?

S: No, I had a general sort of guidance to keep up any contacts that I could find useful, but I never, I don't think, recall . . . In fact, I received very few instructions all the time I was in Laos, partly because so much of the focus of the people who were concerned with that part of the world was clearly on Vietnam and partly because Laos is such a confusing and confused situation . . .

M: Who would instruct you? (Laughter)

S: . . . that not much of anybody wanted to undertake instructions. Nothing seemed to be going too critically, as I said. So I don't recall. As I say, Dean Rusk encouraged me every time I came back to try to see what I could do about getting anything started, and I regarded them as broad, general instructions, but I never had any specifics, and I didn't regard that all these talks I had with them, which I always reported, really led anywhere.

M: Was the first word you had of Hanoi's willingness to discuss beginning negotiations from William Baggs, as has been reported, or did you get it from Hanoi first?

S: No, no. Let me see. I can't remember the . . . That was an amusing episode. The North Vietnamese were clearly planning something, so they brought in a whole menagerie of people. They brought in Baggs and Ashmore. They brought in Mary McCarthy; [they brought in]

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the professor from California, who was a Marxist whose name I can't remember. And then they asked for Walter Cronkite. Well, Walter was otherwise engaged, but they sent Charles Collingwood. They didn't all come in together; they went in at various times. But they were all up there in Hanoi, each being kept in his own separate little villa and the North Vietnamese sort of toying with these people, each one according to the formula that they were using for the individual. Then they put them all on a plane to come out at the same time and they all arrived out the same night. While that plane was in the air, I guess--I'm not sure while the plane was in the air--the North Vietnamese announced. Anyway, they put out their first statement somewhere about this time or else they--well, I'm a little unclear about this.

But anyway, when Baggs and Ashmore arrived, they insisted they had to see me right away. So they came over to the house and they wanted a stenographer, and they would dictate. And Charlie Collingwood called me and said he had to see me, while Baggs and Ashmore were there; I said, "I've got couple of people here." So I arranged to have breakfast with him at his hotel, and Charlie spilled all this out that he got privately from them. Then, as I was leaving Charlie's, I bumped into Mary McCarthy in the lobby of the hotel, and she told me she had this. And so all of them then got on the same plane and flew off again, each one clutching his secret to his bosom which the North Vietnamese by this were announcing anyway. So that we didn't really get it, in the first instance, from these fellows.

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M: Then did you pursue, through your mission, the talks with the North Vietnamese that ultimately led to the designation of Paris?

S: Right.

M: How closely were you instructed in those?

S: Oh, minutely. They were written by the hand of LBJ, too, I gather, or written by Walt Rostow.

M: In what vein were these instructions? How wide a latitude did they give you for acceptance of sites, for example?

S: Oh, none. They gave me specific proposals to make, and I made them. And, of course, the Vietnamese to whom I was making them had no specific authority. He had to go back to Hanoi. So we were very much in that sort of negotiation where you're doing something as concrete and specific as that, you never have latitude anywhere you're just acting as the go-between. I put in some views on some of these things, but these were very much run back here I guess from the way in which I was getting the messages, although they were coming out as State Department messages. You know, I'd get one from Walt Rostow. So I assume that they were coming straight from President Johnson.

M: Did you have instructions to accept Paris before it was offered?

S: No, the way we did that was to--well, again, I can't recall the details. But it seems to me we sort of blocked out everything except Paris and left it for them to say Paris. And I frankly at that point thought we had reached a dead end and weren't going to get anywhere.

M: Oh, really. The choice of site was that serious that you actually

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thought it was going to disrupt the whole negotiating possibility?

S: I thought that we had reached a dead end in Vientiane on it. I thought they might have to pick it up, because they had said they wanted to discuss the site and wanted to have a preliminary meeting in Warsaw to discuss the site, and I thought they were going to stick with that. When we went back sort of turning down everything, but leaving open the prospect of Paris without mentioning it, I didn't think we were going to get much of anything. In fact, I think I sat down and said we'd better prepare our ambassador in Warsaw for the fact that there may be a little man come around and knock on his door and just hand him a little piece of paper there saying, "Paris," so that they could have it their way, have their cake and eat it too. In other words, they would agree to Paris, but just to be stubborn about it, they would do it in Warsaw rather than Vientiane.

M: How long did it take to get approval of Paris after it was offered?

S: Oh, immediately.

M: No question.

S: No question. So, then I believe it was a couple or three days later, I can't remember, surprisingly, one of the Vietnamese lower ranking people came around and I'm not sure whether he asked whether I could go to their place or whether he asked whether their man could come to mine. I think the former; he asked if I could go over there. I was surprised to get this, because it meant that they were presumably coming through. When I went over, they said Paris. I told him I'd let him know, but obviously he was aware that this gives us a viable deal.

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- M: How long did you stay in Laos? Through the rest of the Johnson Administration, or did you come home shortly after that?
- S: I stayed through the rest of the administration. I had expected to leave. In fact, Rusk had asked me if I would take on another assignment which we had agreed upon, and I was all set to be going to that in the spring of 1968. Then again I can't remember whether the President personally asked me or whether it came through Rusk, but I know I was asked to stay on through the end of the administration, which I agreed to do. So I stayed there until March of 1969.
- M: Did you have any presidential involvement of any consequence through that latter year, after the negotiations started in Paris through the balance of 1968?
- S: No. I went over to Paris for the opening of the talks. Harriman asked me to join him there. I came across the Soviet Union actually to get there in time for it. I had gotten ill in Laos just before all that, and when I got to Paris, I was not getting any better. Then they had a French strike, and all the hospitals were closed and so forth. So I came back here to the Bethesda Naval Hospital to get straightened out. I'm not sure that I saw the President in that period at all.
- M: You didn't play a regular ongoing role in the negotiations in Paris?
- S: No, I went back to Paris at the [start]. Let's see, the Paris talks started in May.
- M: May, yes.
- S: I went to Paris for the beginning of them. I stayed there two or three weeks. Then I came back here and was in the hospital for a

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while. I went back to Paris in June, stayed just a few days. I think it was clear we weren't going to get anywhere then.

M: Do you think the mission there thought that we weren't going to get anywhere in June?

S: Well, it was clear that we weren't going to get anywhere in that time frame, that we had a much longer haul than that to go. So I went back to Laos. Part of the reason Harriman asked me to come to Paris was that I knew Xuan Thuy, the head of the delegation. I'd known him from Geneva days, and Ha Van Lau, who was there. They sent Le Duc To, and it was quite clear that Xuan Thuy and Ha Van Lau weren't going to be the guys making the decision. So any special entree I had to those two was not all that much of pertinence at that stage. Besides I had to get back to Laos. I don't recall, I don't think I came back to this country from then until March. By that time, President Nixon was in the White House. I don't think I saw President Johnson anymore.

M: Were there any instances of contact with the President that you feel like are revealing or interesting that I haven't had occasion to mention so far? I don't want to cut you off by my failure to mention them.

S: No, most of my contacts with him, as I said, were strictly either in the Cabinet Room or the Oval Room, strictly on business and strictly . . . either in connection with some specific problem that was being discussed at that time or on courtesy calls when I came in from the field. No, I obviously wasn't that intimate with the President. He

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was always very pleasant and very generous, but I never had any spectacular or other relationships with him.

M: You've been very generous with your time this morning and very pleasant to talk to, and I appreciate it. Anything that you'd like to add, you're welcome to do so.

S: No.

M: Thank you very much.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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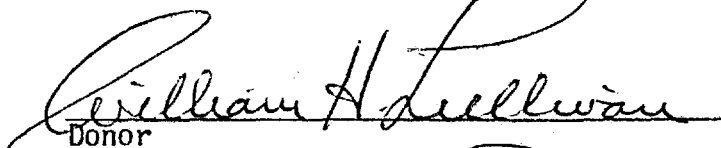
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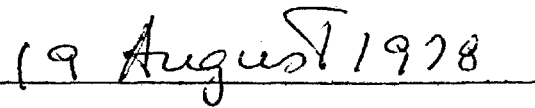
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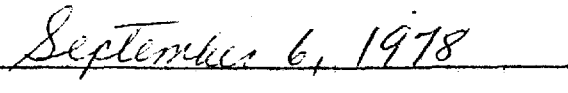
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