

INTERVIEW II

DATE: June 1, 1981
INTERVIEWEE: MAXWELL D. TAYLOR
INTERVIEWER: TED GITTINGER
PLACE: General Taylor's residence, Washington, D.C.

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G: General Taylor, can you tell me the reasons for your trip to Vietnam in 1957?

T: By that time, I was chief of staff of the army, and I had not returned to the Far East since becoming chief in 1955. Hence I naturally included Vietnam, which had a growing military mission, on my schedule. I was particularly interested to see my old friend General Sam Williams whom I'd picked for the job for several reasons. One, he was a very fine soldier and a man of great character, also he'd been extraordinarily successful with the Koreans. The Korean army swore by him in the critical last days of the war when they were fighting off the last Chinese attack. So I had the feeling that Sam, while not looking like a diplomat, had something about him the Oriental military men would appreciate.

G: Was that the battle of the Kumsong salient?

T: Kumsong salient, yes.

G: How did you find the country team state of affairs?

T: Well, I found it was doing very well indeed, just as I expected. I spent, I think, only a day and a half, something like that. I

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couldn't pretend to know too much about the details, I didn't expect to.

G: Was that when Ambassador [Elbridge] Durbrow had come, or had he not come yet?

T: I don't know. I saw him on one trip. I believe that was the one. Incidentally, this was my second trip to Vietnam. I'd been there in 1955 when J. Lawton Collins was the de facto ambassador.

G: I see. Was there anything particularly that remains with you from that trip? The earlier trip?

T: Yes. That was a very impressive thing. I came down from Korea. I'd been following the war from a distance. Then my war in Korea ran out, and I was very anxious to go down and see on the spot what was taking place in Saigon. Well, that was the time just after the exchange of populations; about a million anti-communists came down from the North and were settled in and around Saigon. There was just one mass of temporary camps, and I could see the kinds of people and get some idea of what the future problem would be in absorbing vast numbers of refugees.

G: So there was a tremendous refugee problem, obviously.

T: There was, indeed.

G: Did you have any part in trying to deal with that?

T: Well, we didn't have the means. We had no MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] of any size at that time so our means were not very

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great, but certainly General Collins in his capacity was doing what he could and reporting to Washington any needs that might be met.

G: What was your overall impression of the job General Williams was doing? Were you satisfied?

T: Oh, very much so. Very much so.

G: There has been a lot of controversy about the kind of training that we were giving the South Vietnamese forces.

T: I don't recall whether it had come up at that point or not. You see, the JCS viewed Vietnam always within the context of the defense of Southeast Asia, as they should, at least up to a point. And what they were thinking about was, "What should we do in case of a massive attack from the Chinese, perhaps combined with the North Vietnamese?" That concern had been lying around for a long while as one of those, call it a worst possible case if you will, which needed serious attention. So that was the JCS point of view. They wanted the Vietnamese forces to be able to participate in the defense of Southeast Asia against a heavy conventional attack from the North. So that gave the initial orientation at a time when the Viet Cong threat was only a nuisance, certainly a serious nuisance, but had not take the dimensions which it assumed later on.

G: Were there any voices in those early days trying to tell us that we ought to be doing something other than that?

T: Not that I recall, certainly not at that time.

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G: A related issue concerns not the type of training perhaps, perhaps the Joint Chiefs are not faulted for looking for a conventional threat from the North, but rather for attempting to equip and train the South Vietnamese as a sort of image of the American army.

T: I would say that no American soldier would ever admit to doing that deliberately, but don't think it doesn't affect him, because you teach what your experience has taught you to a large extent. So the American influence certainly followed the path, generally, of the experience of the officers who happened to be the instructors on the spot.

G: Were you aware at the time of any dissension in the mission over this particular issue?

T: No. Are we still talking about the time in 1957?

G: Yes, sir. The 1957 visit. Did you visit Saigon again before 1961?

T: No.

G: Of course that brings us to a very big year, in 1961.

T: Which I recorded very thoroughly in Swords and Plowshares.

G: Yes, sir, and I've made a definite effort not to rehash that insofar as I can, but I feel like I have to touch on some aspects of it. What was particularly interesting to you, that you were particularly looking for when you went to South Vietnam?

T: My interest was guided exclusively, or virtually exclusively, by the directive I had from the President, which sent me on this mission to look at the situation in South Vietnam and to determine what was needed to be done to make our program successful. It was not to raise the question,

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"Is there a national interest in continuing our efforts?" That had been determined by the National Security Council the last time in May of 1961. My task was purely a matter of studying a situation which had been reported to Washington by several responsible officials as being deteriorated, and deciding what to do to reverse that trend.

G: There have been stories of problems within the mission in Saigon at the time. Did you discover evidence of this?

T: No, I did not. Now bear in mind, visitors like us going to a place like Saigon or any other station of that sort, even though we were there I believe around ten days and worked very hard, each one of us-- we couldn't verify anything like the rumors that might be floating around Washington. As a matter of fact, I don't recall that it was [Frederick] Nolting's mission that generated the reports of the kind that were in Washington. It certainly was not on my checklist to investigate rumors. Later on, the internal state of the embassy became a serious question.

G: I have heard that one of the more colorful members of your mission was an old Southeast Asia hand by the name of [Edward] Lansdale. Was he--?

T: He was not a member of my mission.

G: He was not?

T: No, indeed. Never was.

G: Well, then [David] Halberstam's story is--

T: He was just getting a ride on my airplane.

G: Oh, I see.

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T: No, he was not a mission member.

G: Well, what was he doing?

T: He had had considerable experience in the country. It was well known that he knew many of the personalities. He expressed a desire, I think, and as far as I know it was his request, to have a chance to go back and get a feel of things. And I welcomed his presence, because I realized that here was a man who to some extent at least was an expert, and [I would] be glad to hear anything he had to say.

G: Well, did he report anything to you?

T: No, he didn't come back with us, as a matter of fact. But he had made one of the reports that rather shook up the White House some months before, and I'd read that and I was very much interested. So I looked forward to seeing him when he got back. I don't recall we ever sat down and really talked over what he saw on the trip. I saw his cables so I had a pretty good understanding.

G: So he didn't go to Baguio, then, after the mission?

T: I don't think he came to Baguio at all. As a matter of fact, I had to intervene with the ambassador to get him to be allowed to go into Manila.

G: Really?

T: Yes. He was viewed by that particular ambassador as being, well, not dangerous, but as having contacts that might be misinterpreted if it were known that he were about town. I replied to the Ambassador, "All right, then none of us will come to town if Lansdale can't." We all went.

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G: Oh, really? That's interesting. I hadn't heard that. That's interesting.

As long as we're on Lansdale, let me ask another question which comes up in this context. Didn't President [Ngo Dinh] Diem ask that Lansdale be sent as some kind of a personal adviser or something of that sort?

T: You mentioned that in your questions. I'm not sure that's the case. I really don't know but it has a certain familiar note. But then the question is, "Well, why didn't he go?" I certainly had no part in deciding one way or another because I didn't know at the time the request had been made. Of course, if Diem asked for Lansdale or anybody else, certainly if Washington were on the ball--and they should be--they would then ask Nolting, "Did you concur in this?" and if Nolting said yes, he'd probably go, and if he said no, he definitely wouldn't.

G: So you're suggesting then that if he didn't go we might look at the embassy to see why.

T: Well, have you talked to Nolting, by the way?

G: No, sir.

T: You ought to talk to him. He's right down in Virginia.

G: He's on my hit list.

T: Well, I'd be interested to know what he says.

G: What was the relationship between Laos and Vietnam in 1961 when you first served there?

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T: I would say that from the point of view of Saigon, there was great concern in Saigon about Laos, both in the embassy and among the senior officials of the Vietnamese government.

(Interruption)

G: But the connection was primarily, from your point of view, a military [one]?

T: No, it was the impact of Laos, the negotiations there, on the South Vietnamese. Their feeling was that the kind of solution with scotch tape being negotiated in Laos was going to break down, and the commies would eventually take over--they had a way of doing this kind of thing. That feeling had a definite impact on the morale of Saigon, of the officials, to which were added the big flood of the Mekong and the assassination of the Vietnamese liaison officer with the Americans. This combination of things happening at about the same time as I arrived had created a great cloud of gloom over the whole official front.

G: Now, when the so-called Taylor-Rostow report of this trip was written, you and Dr. [Walt] Rostow apparently both believed that it might become possible or necessary to apply some kind of military pressures against the North to cut off their support and encouragement. What kinds of pressures were envisioned at this time?

T: Well, that was simply a warning we put in to the President, that we were giving him a long list of recommendations which represented in the aggregate something of a change of direction in policy. Actually, it was rather an intensification of effort toward the current policy,

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staying in roughly the original direction. But we also saw--and we didn't have to be very percipient to see--that the real source of the danger of Vietnam was from Hanoi. While we had at least a chance to be able to build up the internal defenses in South Vietnam to the point of restoring normalcy to South Vietnam, it might not work. So don't think, Mr. President, we were saying, that we guarantee that this is all we have to do. We have a weapon that we've never thought much about using, namely an attack at the source. If this problem had ever been given to Leavenworth [Command and General Staff College] or the War College to resolve strategically, the choice would have been an attack on the North.

G: This is a fundamental question, I think. In what ways did we see Hanoi giving concrete support and encouragement? Was it by infiltration or--?

T: Well, I can't tell you just what the state of our intelligence was at the time except that it was very inadequate. I would say that perhaps that the most important message my mission brought back to Washington was that the intelligence we'd been getting on South Vietnam was so unreliable that we'd better start over again and try to erase any impression we had formed until we had reasonably reliable information to replace it.

G: What was wrong with our [intelligence]? What kind of wrong impressions were we getting? Were we getting too good, too bad--?

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T: Well, it was essentially the weakness of the intelligence system of the Vietnamese. Bear in mind, we had a relatively small U.S. mission of only a few hundred, so that our intelligence people could do little more than ask the Saigon authorities to answer the very tough questions being fired at the embassy from Washington. Our people would get a question, thoroughly legitimate in most circumstances: "What was the Vietnam rice crop last year? How much was harvested and how does that compare to the last four years?" For a question like that, we didn't have [the answer] in the embassy, so our people just walked over and gave it to the prime minister or the minister of agriculture saying, "Please give us a reply as soon as you can." Well, [the] minister didn't have the answer either, although he wouldn't admit it. So he either went out and hastily collected some figures, or just guessed a figure and sent us a reply which we then fired back to Washington. Meanwhile our colleagues here in Washington recorded such data on graphs or charts, and assumed they knew the true situation.

G: Who was our primary intelligence gathering agency? Was the CIA at that time primarily responsible?

T: Yes, but State was responsible for political reporting. The military mission contributed nothing. For years there had been an unfortunate directive out to MAAG chiefs: "Don't use your people for intelligence purposes." So the embassy military attaches couldn't go over and talk to their military colleagues across the hall and ask them for intelligence regarding the armed forces they were advising.

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G: Isn't that rather unusual?

T: It's worse than that, it's stupid. I discovered it as army chief of staff and I sent orders out to stop all this nonsense right away. Obviously a MAAG officer doesn't want to go around looking like a spook or anything of that sort, but every bit of knowledge he gets that's helpful to the government, he should report to Washington.

G: Can you recall about when you took this action?

T: No, I just remember my action when I discovered it.

G: Is this when you were chairman of the Joint Chiefs?

T: No. Sometime when army chief of staff. Apparently the directive never got to Saigon.

G: Oh, I see. [When you were] chief of staff of the army. Oh, I see. Okay.

Of course, everyone talks about the bombing which later became such a big issue.

T: Rostow and I weren't talking about bombing targets in our 1961 report. We were just saying to the President: "Bear in mind that the real enemy, the real trouble is in Hanoi. If we can't accomplish our purpose down here, we're going to have to do something in North Vietnam."

G: Okay. When did General [Paul] Harkins go out, do you recall?

T: He replaced [General Lionel] McGarr.

G: McGarr was there at--

T: McGarr was there when I visited in 1957.

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G: Oh, no, that was Williams.

T: Oh, Williams, yes.

G: McGarr would have been there when you and Mr. Rostow went, was he not?

T: I guess that's the time.

G: Because General Williams came back in the fall of 1960.

T: I guess that's right. Yes.

G: So McGarr would have been there just about a year. Why was [he replaced]?

T: Well, we decided to upgrade the MAAG to MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] and to put a four-star general there. The question, "Who?" I nominated Harkins because I knew him well.

I'd known him in Europe when he was [George] Patton's deputy chief of staff. I had him as commandant of cadets at West Point when I was superintendent, and I'd seen quite a bit of him after he took the command of the army component in CINCPAC. So he not only had the rank, he had broad experience and he was geographically near the spot in Honolulu. He was a natural. I nominated him without any question.

G: The information from Saigon, intelligence reporting and so forth, did that get funneled through him on the way to CINCPAC, would you say, so that he had a feel for the situation?

T: Oh, yes. It should have. He was at CINCPAC headquarters.

G: Another recommendation of the report was that certain kinds of improved equipment be furnished to the South Vietnamese, including increased numbers of aircraft, I believe.

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T: And helicopters.

G: And helicopters. And some armored personnel carriers, I think.

T: Well, I'd forgotten about the armored personnel carriers. In fact, I don't recall them.

G: Well, I have seen in various reports--I'm not even sure where now-- the new M-113--

T: Not at that time.

G: Not at that time? Okay.

T: I'd say no.

G: How did that work out? They did get this new equipment.

T: Well, first bear in mind that it was expected that the light helicopters would be gradually fed in to the Vietnamese as they could fly them--but not in the early phase. It gave our local commander great leverage to have helicopters and then loan them to the Vietnamese when he wanted to and thereby control their operations as necessary.

G: This was leverage that could be used, then?

T: Oh, yes. It was a secondary advantage.

G: Did we get evidence in succeeding months after the dispatch of the helicopters that this was working out?

T: Well, I'll just say that for the year thereafter--we're talking about 1962--everything seemed to pick up. We followed in Washington, as best we could, the reports on the various things that we had recommended, how were they going. It took about a year at least to get a noticeable improvement [in] the intelligence connection. But in general,

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I had the satisfying feeling that we were moving along not badly.

That was generally true up until 1963 and the Buddhist upheaval.

G: Vice President Johnson visited Saigon, I think, in 1961 also. Did you have anything to do with that?

T: He preceded us. I'm not even sure whether I ever saw his report as such. I was told parts of it, at least. One of the first things I did when I got back in 1961, at President Kennedy's direction, was to go to the Vice President and tell him everything I found, and frequently he'd say, "Yes, I saw that, too."

G: So he didn't call into question anything that you observed?

T: Not that I'm aware of. He seemed to be quite favorable to everything I recommended. I know of nothing to contradict that impression.

G: At the time that you went to Saigon with Mr. Rostow, there were rumors that there was trouble in the country team. The press was carrying stories. There were beginning to be hints that all was not well between Ambassador Nolting and General McGarr, for instance. But you've said that you didn't have time to look into that, or if it was true--

T: No. But I got an unfavorable impression of McGarr, myself, while I was there. I thought he was, say, throwing his weight around. For example, he was quite irritated that I wouldn't let him go with me when I talked to President Diem. I told him frankly that I had met President Diem, we would be speaking French, and I always had the feeling that in such an interview the smaller the audience, the more you get from your opposite number. He was very huffy about it.

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Well, I discovered that if he'd been huffy to me, he'd been even more than that to other people. I think that professionally he performed well. But his time in Saigon was about up anyway, so I was very happy when the occasion came to relieve him and put Harkins in.

G: Well, now, he'd only been there about a year, I guess.

T: I thought it was more than that. I'm not sure.

G: MACV was formed--

T: I'll just say I felt very happy when [he left].

G: All right, we'll leave it at that then.

Had you ever had the same impression with General Williams, that there was any problem between him and the Ambassador?

T: No. Let me say this, though. Whenever you have a MAAG in a country, especially a small country, inevitably the head man in the local government tries to play him off against the ambassador. We found it so world-wide. It depends then on how good the ambassador and the general work together and don't allow themselves to be misused. Diem was always saying, "I can't get along with the ambassador," whichever ambassador it happened to be, "Ah, but General so-and-so, he's fine."

G: That was Ambassador Durbrow, I think.

T: Of course the reason is, the general has things to give that the country wants. He has tangible ways to help the country, whereas the poor ambassador, as I soon discovered when I became one, usually brings only bad news. So it's inevitable that there be

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an effort made [to divide them], and whether it's successful or not depends upon the character of the two men involved.

G: I see. Okay.

Would you agree that press relations tended to get worse after 1961, more or less progressively?

T: I wouldn't say 1961. I would say it wasn't bad when I was ambassador, because the interest of the American people in Vietnam was [not as great at that time]. The press had some representation there, but nothing resembling the size after our troops came in. That's when the flood came.

G: Now 1963, I seem to remember, was a bad year with the press because that was when we had the Buddhist troubles.

T: That's right. And the media were magnifying everything that took place. Yes, that was a bad year.

G: Right. That was before [you became ambassador].

T: That's why I don't have a direct feeling as [to] the intensity of relations with the media.

G: I think you said in Swords and Plowshares that some members of the press had a vendetta against General Harkins.

T: They developed one primarily because Harkins committed the offense of saying repeatedly that things weren't going to pot, we weren't losing the war and so on, and that contradicted everything most of the reporters were sending back. And they didn't like Harkins for professional reasons and frequently for personal reasons.

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G: Personal reasons?

T: Well, in the sense that Harkins got and exhibited a very low opinion of them.

G: Oh, I see.

T: Bear in mind that up until the army got helicopters, the press men, no matter how they tried, couldn't get any place around the country on their own. They wrote the dispatches at the bar of what was the famous hotel in Saigon?

G: The Caravelle?

T: That's it. The Caravelle Hotel. You could make a much better story there than you could sitting out on a hot log someplace in the jungle. So life was hard for reporters. They were very disgruntled and tended to hold Harkins responsible. Actually, neither Harkins nor the ambassador could do much for them, because until helicopters came, nobody could get around easily.

G: Now there was a notorious case after the helicopters came--I think it was in January of 1963, early January--a battle at the village called Ap Bac.

T: I remember there was such a battle, but I don't remember anything about it.

G: Well, the gist of it was that people like Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam got out there, John Paul Vann was the adviser, and it was clearly a botched battle no matter which side you were on. Halberstam and Sheehan reported that General Harkins told them it was a victory when they saw clearly that it was not, and that seemed

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to have set everything in concrete after that. General [Earle] Wheeler came back from a visit about that time, I think. Do you remember him saying anything about the affair?

T: I don't remember the incident at all.

G: Okay.

T: There were so many incidents in the course of this thing, that one I missed.

G: Was the mission in Saigon as bad about leaks to the press as we hear it was?

T: Well, you never know how to count leaks, or to be sure that something that certainly sounds like a leak is one. Yes, there were all sorts of reports and I have no doubt some leaks came out of the embassy, but again, you never can know for sure how many and who did it.

G: Can you recall any particularly distressing [incidents]? I don't have one in mind, I'm just--

T: No. Of course, the press was full of it. If you had brought the newspapers around here, I could perhaps remember the incidents. But there was certainly the strong indication that there were elements within the mission itself that were not loyal to the ambassador. That was my overall impression.

G: How about the Vietnamese side? Was that pretty leaky?

T: They were infiltrated constantly by the Viet Cong. They didn't have to leak. (Laughter)

G: I was going to ask you about that, but I'm going to save that--

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T: Again, you can't prove that. Now, there were just enough cases that you did identify, and it was so easy for the enemy to infiltrate the government in that sort of civil war, that one had to assume the enemy sooner or later would get anything you gave to your local colleagues in Vietnam.

G: Can you think of any operations that were compromised in that fashion?

T: No.

G: Okay.

T: I have been talking about very small operations, not a D-Day kind of thing in which a leak could be truly disastrous.

G: You've anticipated one of my questions about intelligence and the problems that existed with it. Can you remember how or when, if ever, you first noticed that it was getting better, that you had more confidence?

T: You can't measure the quality of intelligence by a thermometer. Little by little you find you are getting credible answers to questions which previously went unanswered. All the while, we were putting a tremendous effort into this thing. Our electronic surveillance of the radio nets of the VC eventually--and I don't recall what year--reached a very high peak of effectiveness. And while you could never read the messages, just by the study of the shift of the location and numbers of headquarters, you could infer a tremendous amount of fact which was extremely valuable.

G: Now, you came back to Saigon in 1963 with Secretary McNamara, I believe.

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- T: I've made numbers of trips, yes.
- G: Was this a subject of concern at that time that you recall? The quality of intelligence?
- T: Well, we had a long list of matters to check every time. As all my trips were similar, without seeing the trip agenda, I couldn't be specific about any one of them.
- G: I would have sent you some, but this is before our Library has documents and I didn't have access to the Kennedy [Library's].
- T: I never had access to any of these when I wrote Swords and Plowshares. I had a rather limited collection of copies of my own cables and things of that sort--also a fresher memory than now.
- G: The reason I bring that trip up is because there's been speculation about the fact that John Richardson, who was then station chief of CIA, was recalled or came back just a few days after the mission left. Was there some connection between those two things?
- T: You'll have to have [John] McCone about that, because he relieved Richardson--it didn't affect me in any way. I had plenty of other trouble without nosing into the cause of his relief. I'd met Richardson; he acted and talked like a good man. I think his record with CIA was very favorable, but I gathered he had got in a jam with [Henry Cabot] Lodge and that led to his relief. That's adequate reason, because an ambassador certainly ought to be satisfied with his principal intelligence officer.
- G: Was there some dispute between agencies at this time over who was supposed to be the prime intelligence gatherer?

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T: No, none that I know of. You see, CIA is an unusual situation. It is a collecting agency itself, and yet its director has a coordinating responsibility for all the other agencies in intelligence. Its representatives in the field don't really command. They're supposed to coordinate, supervise, and be sure one agency doesn't get in the way of another. When there are tasks to be done and one or more agencies that might undertake it, the local CIA man is supposed to say, "Well, give it to the army or the navy or I'll take it," or whatever it happens to be. The fact that Washington may get several channels of intelligence has never been viewed as necessarily bad. That's supposed to be reconciled in Washington. CIA does the shaking out, but they're supposed to report--and as far as I know they usually do--that "we're interpreting the matter this way, but we should tell you that the army interpretation is different." Which is fair enough.

G: Was there effective coordination between our advisers at that time and the CIA?

T: Advisers? You mean those in the field?

G: In MACV, yes.

T: In the field?

G: Yes, sir.

T: Well, I don't know how they [coordinated in the field]. I would know how they coordinated at the local level in Saigon. So far as I know, it was all right. Very good.

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G: Okay. Of course, when Diem was overthrown, our intelligence has been faulted for not giving us very much warning about that. You say you were surprised, for example. You said--I think I'm quoting you--that you were as surprised as anyone.

T: Well, Harkins will tell you that he sent a cable about twenty-four hours [before the coup], that he had a rumor to that effect. But he'd sent probably a half dozen other cables, giving similar reports of impending coups at different times, which didn't come off. It was the old business of the dulling effect of too many cries of "Wolf!" It didn't make any difference in this case; we couldn't have done anything about it had we known it was about to occur. But it is true that the day the news came in to Washington, we were certainly surprised.

G: Oh, yes.

T: Because of the absence of any action following the dispatch of the famous cable of August 24, we became convinced that the generals were never going to get together and do anything.

G: Was the Diem coup a mistake?

T: Oh, it was a disaster, a national disaster.

G: For both sides, do you think? Both for the Americans--

T: Yes, both for Americans and South Vietnamese.

Incidentally, when I was in Saigon as ambassador, the period late in 1964 was the lowest point of the situation until the very end when everything collapsed in 1975. I've been asked, "Didn't you ever think of suggesting we pull out in this period? Why didn't

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you recommend that we Americans come home?" I said, "Yes, I thought about that. But I had at least three awfully good reasons not to do it, not even to be tempted to do it." The first was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution where all of Congress except two senators had said in effect, "This is a vital operation involving the American interest. We must be victorious in South Vietnam." That to me was a message: "Taylor, you've been doing all right, you're on the right course, but pull up your socks and do better." Next was the fact that we'd never used our air arm in a way to get the most from this asset. Finally, we Americans had in large measure created or were responsible for the chaos by our action in the case of Diem. The situation was certainly in part our doing.

G: I would like to try to reconcile two views of the effect of the fall of Diem on the military situation. One view is that the Viet Cong military units very soon began to attempt to reap the profits created. Another view is that the NLF as a whole, the whole infrastructure, the whole front organization, actually lost about a third of its membership because the new government, while it was extremely weak, was very popular, maybe for the same reason.

T: I doubt the latter. If the Vietnamese government was so popular in this period, why did they keep turning over--five times in one year?

G: Well, I would imagine because these were generals' coups and not necessarily representative of the population.

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- T: Who could say that, to the peasant out trying to grow a little rice, any Saigon government was ever popular? It never was popular. As the seat of central government, Saigon was necessarily bad news to every peasant. That's where the tax collectors came from. On the other hand, the evidence of a new level of activity on the part of the Viet Cong and Hanoi following the overthrow of Diem was very apparent. It showed in all the records.
- G: Now Secretary [Robert] McNamara went out, I think, in December of 1963, which would have been about two months after the Diem coup. And he came back with a report--
- T: Was that the time I went out with him and we took [Nguyen] Khanh around the provinces raising his arms in the air?
- G: No, I think this was before Khanh. I think this was just before the Khanh coup. I think [Duong Van "Big"] Minh was still in.
- T: The Khanh coup came in December. The Big Minh coup, the one that overthrew Diem, didn't last but a week or so.
- G: Well, in any case, Secretary McNamara reported that the country team was having problems. Do you remember what he found.
- T: From Washington we had been seeing signs for some time that Lodge and Harkins didn't get along--a surprising development considering their past association.
- G: What was at issue between those two?
- T: Well, there was no specific issue as far as I [could see], in a way. One of the things I have forgotten to mention was that Harkins had been an old friend of Lodge's. They'd both served in the National

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Guard together, I believe it was. In any case, they had been together before and when I mentioned to Lodge that we were thinking about Harkins to go to Saigon, he seemed very happy. So it looked like a very good pair to have there. Well, we soon discovered that wasn't the case. I don't recall that Harkins ever complained to me early in his assignment to Saigon. However we chiefs in the Pentagon began to notice that State was getting information from the Ambassador which we never received from Harkins. Raising the question with Harkins on the private cable, I learned that he wasn't getting the information either. The trouble was a lack of communication for which I felt Lodge was responsible. Harkins was not the kind to hold back on information if he had any. But Lodge turned out to be a loner who didn't communicate easily.

(Interruption)

G: Let's go ahead with General Harkins' difficulties then with Ambassador Lodge.

T: Well, this developed into a rather serious schism between the Ambassador and the General. Not over any specific issue, as far as I knew. Neither one ever mentioned a difference of substance. When McNamara and I made the trip to Vietnam we talked to both men about the failure of communications. Both agreed to do their part in correcting the fault but Lodge's performance was never entirely satisfactory, in my opinion. Sharing information was just not Lodge's way of doing business. And we found that his civilian subordinates in the embassy complained about the same thing. He continued to run--

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G: A one-man show.

T: Yes, a one-man show. He never had a real country team in the embassy.

G: Now, this brings up an interesting incident about which we don't know very much. Secretary McNamara also included in this report a ray of hope. He said that a young man by the name of David Nes was about to organize the country team under Lodge and correct all of these faults. And about six weeks later, David Nes came home, having been there only a couple of months. Do you know anything about that?

T: This McNamara paper, what form is that in?

G: Well, it was a report.

T: Report of our trip?

G: After the trip.

T: I can't believe I didn't see it, because we always passed our papers around. The name Nes is familiar but I don't recall exactly the connection.

G: Let me tell you what I have and see if it--this is a paraphrase, but he said Nes was a bright young man who was then working on an executive committee below Lodge to coordinate mission activities. Now I have indications that shortly after this that Nes got the sack from Lodge.

T: I'm sorry I can't recall this episode if I was ever acquainted with it.

(Interruption)

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G: Secretary McNamara's report also said, and I think this is a quote, "U.S. resources and personnel cannot be usefully increased at that time, but we should prepare for more forceful moves if the situation does not show early signs of improvement," unquote. Do you know if he had anything specific in mind or if this--?

T: No, we were recognizing the game was going against us, starting to turn at least. And we saw the disorder which was following the murder of Diem.

G: Soon after this come the first big battles I guess you would call them, in 1964, the spring and early summer of 1964 when--

T: Well, there were several.

G: I'm not referring to any one in particular, but there were a number of large-scale engagements, I think, battalion and maybe even regimental size.

T: In the North.

G: Well, I think there was one at a rubber plantation and several other places, and the ARVN just took a beating in these. What was your feeling?

T: First I was anxious to get a clear picture of the situation. So the next time McNamara and I returned to Vietnam, our first question was--what about the ARVN? And we got a very bad report from Westy [William Westmoreland] and also from some of Westy's officers, including [General William] Depuy, who was G-3 at the time.

G: He was the counter-insurgency man, wasn't he?

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T: Yes. He described very clearly the misbehavior of several ARVN units, complete failure of units which had been, we thought, among the most promising.

G: What was the explanation?

T: The picture we received was a general decline of the ARVN, especially in the North. This situation made the safety of Danang a primary concern of Westy in 1965 and led to the decision to bring in U.S. combat troops.

G: I see.

T: The deterioration of the performance of the troops in the North went on for some time. I don't remember what else--

G: What did we see as the chief cause of this?

T: I talked repeatedly to our people on the subject but they had no precise answer. The general feeling seemed to be we may have been pressing them too fast, expecting too much of them. And there was always the question of leadership. If you have a good division commander, you have a good division. Well, that's usually true, unless he happens to be the only good officer in the division. "Well," I would ask Westy, "can you get Diem--or his successors--to replace inadequate commanders?" Westy always said he could, but that took a little time. He couldn't just go around ordering, "Can Jones tomorrow."

That raises the collateral question of whether Westy had enough command authority or not. I always doubted it, based on my experience in Korea where the U.S. commander had operational command

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authority over Korean forces. Most senior U.S. officers in that war felt that such authority was indispensable. But Westy felt that it was not necessary, indeed was undesirable in Vietnam. He had such close relations with, first, the head of state--whoever it happened to be--and then the senior generals that he could get what he wanted while retaining an advisory role. If necessary, he could look any high Vietnamese official in the eye and say, "You'd better do this if you are to retain the confidence and support of the Americans." He had the added argument, it would be a blow to the pride of the ARVN forces to change a well-established advisory system and such action would create hard feelings and a loss of morale that might be reflected in troop performance.

G: We had a system of blending Korean trainees in with American troops, didn't we?

T: We had the--what did we call [them]?

G: KATUSAs? [Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army] Was it the KATUSAs?

T: That's right. The KATUSAs. They were invaluable, but their purpose had nothing to do with what we were talking about. The procedure was to introduce into each American infantry platoon, or squad, two or three KATUSAs who stayed there permanently. They never got rotated, and thereby became the veterans of the Eighth Army. Most of them couldn't speak English, although it was surprising how well they could acquire a soldier patois after a while. Since they were always there, they knew everything that needed to be passed along to

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arriving American replacements. A tremendous value to us. The only thing was they got spoiled and pretty soon they too liked their cold beer at the end of the day. (Laughter) It's amazing how the American standard of living can attract adherents very quickly.

G: So it wouldn't work to try to send them back to a Korean division?

T: Well, that's what worried the Koreans. A Korean senior official would say, "Look, you have Korean soldiers that have unusual experience, yet they remain privates with you. Return them to us and we'll make them sergeants. And furthermore, if you keep them too long, they will be no damn good to us at all." (Laughter) And there's a great deal in that. To get KATUSAs back to their own army, you'd have to drag them out kicking, and not only they'd kick, but so would the American commander who had to give them up. But when you added it up, the KATUSA was a very valuable way to use a small part of Korean manpower. Well, Westy knew about it and I called it to Westy's attention, "Don't you think a KATUSA system would be of value to us in Vietnam?" Well, the answer was, "No, I don't think so."

G: Did he elaborate on that part at all?

T: No, not to me.

G: Okay. Now at about this time, there were some changes in the State Department which I'm not sure if you want to address or not. It's important in the whole total picture. The development I'm thinking of is the formation of the interdepartmental task force on Vietnam which was formed right about this time. Do you know anything about how that came into being?

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T: No, there was no special reason of any sort as far as I know. The way our committee-infested government tends to operate, when you have a problem affecting several departments [you tend] to have an interdepartmental ad hoc committee. Well, the task force you mention was ad hoc, but it did have the merit of staying in existence for a considerable period of time. My impression was that it was a very useful clearinghouse for interdepartmental matters at a fairly low level.

G: Do you know what effect this had on the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern affairs, Roger Hilsman?

T: I wouldn't think it would have any. I don't know why it should. It was chaired by State, and bear in mind it didn't make policy, it didn't make decisions. It planned, it followed up on plan execution--at least it was supposed to--and I know nothing to believe that it wasn't a useful committee.

G: Now I know that during 1964, the task force, as you say, was considering all the options, considering everything relevant. Were you consulted on the military options? You were chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

T: No, but I'm sure I had a military representative on the committee.

G: I want to ask another question about the bombing at this time, because the overall picture seems to indicate that some change in attitude toward a possible bombing campaign took place, and I want to see whether that is true or not. We know that there were suggestions made that this committee war game, as it were--the bombing

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at this time--do you know anything about that? Did they go to you?

T: The committee?

G: Yes.

T: No, they wouldn't be competent to war game the bombing.

G: Okay. In case of a bombing campaign, one of the relevant questions was what kind of response can we expect from the other side? What can the other side be expected to do? What did we see as their options? What seemed to us to be particularly worrisome?

T: Well, the only worry--worry may be a strong word--was that bombing might have some effect on Moscow and Peking. This was the concern at the level of the President and the Secretary of State. [Dean] Rusk was the one who particularly voiced this fear. He said in effect, "We know that both of these communist states have mutual defense treaties with North Vietnam. There may be something in such a treaty that says if North Vietnam is attacked by an outside party, the Soviet Union and/or China will have to respond in some way and we don't know what that 'some way' may be."

That was a cogent argument, I thought, at least at the outset to go rather slow with the bombing, move gradually, not be in any great hurry and try to sense what the reaction was abroad, primarily in those two countries. Which we did. That was the early justification for extreme gradualism in the bombing program. The trouble was that once we got in that habit, we never got out of it. I would have said that after three or four months it was pretty clear that

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the Soviets had no real stomach for participation in this war. It was far from home and they were getting no gain from it. It was becoming more and more costly. All they accomplished was to fly communist flag at least as high as the Chinese did since they couldn't afford to let the Chinese look like the leader of the communist world in the Far East. So I would say that there was very little ground to fear retaliation from either the Soviet Union or China after a few months of the bombing.

G: I have seen most of the speculations on the kinds of retaliation that were open or seemed to be open to the other side, and I saw one the other day that I'd never seen before, and I want to ask you whether you had heard of it. A man fairly high placed in the embassy said that there was considerable fear that the Chinese would retaliate against the Seventh Fleet with submarines.

T: No, I never heard that.

G: You'd never heard that one before? Well, he wasn't a military man, so that may explain something.

Now you went, I think, to the Honolulu Conference in June of 1964, is that right?

T: Probably. I went to several.

G: That would have been just before you were named ambassador. Do you recall anything of any moment at that conference?

T: No, I don't remember exactly why we went at that time. Again, if I had the agenda, it would come to mind.

G: I know that the bombing was discussed, but that's all I know. Perhaps it was always discussed.

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T: We were always discussing bombing and the troop requirements of Westmoreland, things like that. They were always on the agenda. I don't recall anything particularly pressing at that time.

G: Well, the agenda is not in our files. Most things are, most things have been opened, but that apparently has not. So I wasn't sure.

Did you know when you went to that that you were going to be named ambassador?

T: I don't know whether I knew my luck at that time or not. I don't think so.

G: I was going to ask you if that influenced your advice at the conference?

T: No. Of course, I became ambassador roughly the first of July, and this was in June, wasn't it?

G: Yes.

T: I don't know whether it was in the bag then or not. I'm reasonably sure that it hadn't been determined at that time.

G: It was clear by then that Mr. Lodge was coming back, though, was it not?

T: Yes, and we were casting around for a replacement. A lot of nominations had been going in to the President, and I thought the President had plenty of choices to pick a really good ambassador.

G: Robert Kennedy had volunteered, hadn't he?

T: Well, that was in the press. What happened was LBJ probably played some tricks. He never worked directly on me; he always worked through Bob McNamara. He was expressing great distress over the problem of replacing Lodge and he said the names submitted by State never satisfied him. That apparently led to either Rusk or McNamara saying, "Well, Mr. President, I'll go if you want me to." The other

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one would beat his chest, "Count on me, too." And the Bob Kennedy, so I'm told, got into the act and he came forward to volunteer.

One day Bob McNamara said to me, "You know, the President really hopes the people around him will show willingness to go out there," and then he described what was taking place. Well, he looked at me and I said, "I don't want to go. I have had too many war years away from home already." "Well, do you think that's right? I think the President would feel easier about this if you'd put your name in, too."

I wasn't entirely happy with this. I smelled at least a small mouse. Nonetheless, I said, "That's all right with me. Put in my name," and then thought no more about it until Bob McNamara reported shortly thereafter, "Well, they're narrowing it down, and the President doesn't want to take either me or Rusk." I replied, "Well, of course he wouldn't. He'd be crazy if he did." He dropped the subject and went off leaving me a little uneasy.

He returned a day or two later with the word that the President did feel that I was the man they wanted, and would I take it? Meanwhile, the President had never said boo to me. But I'd been thinking it over so I replied, "It's the last thing in the world I want to do." In the first place, I hadn't wanted to come back to active duty in 1961 and had declined a couple of jobs that they wanted to give me in the Kennedy Administration. I had told President Kennedy that I would decline any job except one that was really a major military assignment that obviously needed to be done. Since the country had spent a lot of money making a soldier out of me, I wouldn't feel free

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to reject such a position if I felt qualified. Incidentally, one of the jobs that I had turned down was ambassador to France. (Laughter)

G: Why did you turn that down?

T: I had had enough overseas service in military life and my poor wife was worn out from moving. So now, faced with assignment to Vietnam, I told Bob that I'd been five years away from my family in two wars and that the ambassadorship in Saigon was nothing that appealed to me. Further, it seemed to me that with all the foreign service officers we'd been training over the years, there must be a professional that could do the job adequately. But if the President really felt as described, I would take it but for one year only. At that time my mother was still alive. I was the last of the family; I was the only one to look after her. I had plenty of family reasons not to go, and if I went, to return soon. So that was the basis on which I took the job. I pointed out, also, that it was the wrong way to fill it, because that was too important a job to put in a man just for one year.

G: I don't know why I think of it, but what was your opinion of the one-year tour for combat troops in Vietnam?

T: From a military point of view I didn't like it at all, but it was the same problem we had in Korea. Should the government ask a young man to go to Vietnam and stay the duration of the war? We did in World War II. But Vietnam was a limited war requiring limited manpower. Whether a one-year tour was the right length or whether we

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could have lengthened it without too much damage to morale, I don't know.

G: Why do you think President Johnson picked you? Now, I know that you've said because you were expendable, and you will excuse me when I ask.

T: I really was dispensable. I would say I never had a very warm relationship with LBJ, but I think we both looked at things regarding Vietnam about the same way. Incidentally, we shared a joint honor along with General [Omar] Bradley. We were honorary elders of the National Christian Church of Washington, and once in a long while we'd meet in church. We came from roughly the same part of the country. I'd known him quite well when he was a senator and very active on the Senate Armed Services Committee. There we met when I was chief of staff, off and on. So we'd been together. Certainly from the national defense point of view he was an ideal president, as I saw it. But I never felt that we were warm friends, perhaps because I knew he had one strong thing against me. I had had a Robert Kennedy son named after me.

G: Do you really think that was a handicap?

T: I know it did. I don't think in the sense he really distrusted me, but every now and then he'd say, "How is that Kennedy boy named after you?" (Laughter) I wasn't sure he was joking. The Kennedy-Johnson animosity was very real and very deep. And I must say it seemed to me he tried everything under the sun to be friendly with the Kennedys and bury the feud.

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G: It wasn't reciprocated?

T: Not that I perceived. But I told my wife, "That's what I get for the honor of having a namesake."

G: Well, it's not an honor you can decline very gracefully, is it?

T: I would not have been inclined to do so. I'm proud of young Max.

G: President Johnson never spoke to you about the ambassadorship? This all came through Secretary McNamara?

T: Never did.

G: That's a little unusual for him, isn't it?

T: Well, not necessarily. A president doesn't like to be told no to his face, and he shouldn't be put in that position. In other words, he ought to know when he formally presents something that it will be accepted. I had no feelings that the procedure was wrong in this case.

G: Now, you received a letter of instructions from President Johnson which I'm not an expert, but I interpreted it as being a very strong letter of instructions--

T: That's right.

G: --naming you specifically, for example, as the chief officer in the embassy for all affairs, civilian and military. Did this make your appointment somewhat different than it might have been otherwise?

T: Well, I think the President's directive to me was unique, as far as I know. As you might suspect, I wrote it myself. But I wrote it as I did because the President had said in effect, "I want you to be responsible for everything that happens there." I asked, "You mean

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that literally, Mr. President?" He said, "I definitely do." So I drew it up that way.

It was unique in the sense that it put the MAAG and all military activities completely under the ambassador. The ambassador's relation to the head of a MAAG has always been somewhat uncertain, although since the ambassador represents the president, he has a certain amount of ex officio authority. Every ambassador used to get, and I presume still does, a letter of instructions which charges him with representing the president. With that authority any strong man can take it as justification to do almost anything to and with the agencies the government represented in his mission. But he has to be sensible about it. If he tries to go into the military business and do things that affect technical or operational matters, he's way off base and will soon get in trouble, as he should. But he certainly has broad general authority. He is responsible for anything that will affect U.S. relations with the government to which he's accredited.

While every ambassador has a certain amount of authority, I never saw it written so clearly as in my directive. I knew exactly what it meant and how it would be read by the Pentagon and CINCPAC. So when the President had approved it, I sat down with all the Chiefs and explained it to them. Then when I got to Honolulu on my way to Saigon, I repeated the explanation to Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, who had succeeded Admiral Felt as CINCPAC. Oley Sharp was an old friend. I explained it to him and then of course I explained

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it to Westy when I got to Vietnam.. I assured them that, being a military man, I would know enough to keep out of military business with no bearing on my broad responsibilities. However, in the case of Westy, I wanted him to understand the extent of my responsibility and see to it that anything that affected national policy was discussed with me. He would clear it with me if necessary, and in any case, would furnish me copies of his cables bearing on the subject. As far as I know he always followed this procedure. I had no complaint whatsoever.

G: No back channel problems?

T: None. There were plenty of purely military matters about which he could have back channel conversations to the Joint Chiefs and should. But I did not want to be bypassed on issues which might go to the President for decision or cause me trouble with the Saigon government. He never gave me cause to complain. As a matter of fact, I only know of one or two things that he brought to me for clearance that I didn't support.

G: Can you recall what those were?

T: Well, one was the first landing of the troops in Danang.

G: The marines, the first marines?

T: Yes, initially I withheld this concurrence. I don't recall how long in advance of the actual landing Westy had been urging it. My position was that this was the last thing we should want to do. This would be the nose of the camel coming into the tent. We would be starting something, the end of which we could not foresee. Before I would

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agree, I told Westy that he would have to come in here, look me in the eye and say that "I cannot guarantee any longer the security of Danang without the marines." Meanwhile, there were a number of incidents of failure of ARVN units which shook our confidence in them. This was in the spring of 1965. Then it was that Westy came to me and asked for the Marines in these terms. I finally concurred; we joined in a recommendation to Washington and the marines came ashore.

G: Someone has noted that when General Harkins--to regress for a minute--took over command at MACV that he was given a very strong letter of appointment, which you wrote.

T: Oh, yes. I worked that out for him and Ambassador Nolting, who concurred in it after considerable discussion.

G: And then they draw the contrast saying that when you get to be ambassador, you write yourself a very strong letter.

T: The letters were not identical nor was the situation. What's wrong with that? It's like when I left the White House to go to be chairman [of the JCS], the President asked me whom I recommended to take my job in the White House. I said, "Nobody."

Well, the answer was that Nolting didn't like the language of Harkins' letter of instructions which the Joint Chiefs had prepared and cleared by me in the White House. Nolting thought that this gave him [Harkins] an independence of action which was not intended. As he was in Washington, I went over the letter with him word by word, and we made, I believe, some minor changes. Meanwhile

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I explained all the military jargon, in the letter and the way Harkins would interpret it. I promised that in case of any deviation from the text by the military, I would support him if he objected. Then I assured him I'd known Harkins for years and he wasn't the kind that would go hunting on someone else's turf.

G: Did Nolting and Harkins get along well in fact?

T: Yes, yes.

G: No problems?

T: No problems I ever heard of.

G: Okay.

T: How are we doing?

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

NOTE: Quoted conversation throughout this interview is substantially but not necessarily literally accurate. MDT

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