

INTERVIEW III

DATE: September 14, 1981
INTERVIEWEE: MAXWELL D. TAYLOR
INTERVIEWER: TED GITTINGER
PLACE: General Taylor's residence, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: General Taylor, were you satisfied with the forceful response of the United States to the North Vietnamese attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin in August of 1964?

T: Well, first I would say that in Saigon we did not get an immediate interpretation from Washington as to what had happened. However we intercepted the same information that Washington got and none of us questioned the fact that our ships had been attacked by North Vietnamese boats on both days. I can't say we made an analytical study of the evidence, but it seemed an obvious fact that attacks had taken place. True, it had done no real damage to our ships, but nonetheless it was an act of defiance of U.S. Navy to rush out into international waters and attack our ships, even if they didn't do a good job of it.

I was surprised and disappointed we didn't retaliate for the first attack and waited till the second. But I was happy that some retaliation took place, bearing in mind that it was really a symbolic kind of thing that didn't do any great damage to the enemy and wasn't expected to.

G: Would you have preferred the attacks be more extensive, perhaps, or the targets different?

Taylor -- III -- 2

T: I didn't feel strongly about it because I still didn't know really how the navy felt about the extent of the attack, so I accepted it as a reasonable decision.

G: Now, there were other incidents in the fall and early winter of 1964 which many authorities also felt invited retaliation. There was the attack at Bien Hoa against the B-57s. There was the bombing of the Brinks Hotel in Saigon around Christmas. And we didn't retaliate for those. How did you feel about that?

T: Well, I recorded my views in Swords and Plowshares in considerable detail. I felt the attack on Bien Hoa was a turning point because it was the first case where the Viet Cong had directly attacked an American installation. It seemed a warning that henceforth the Americans were going to be targets just as were the South Vietnamese. Hence I recommended at once a retaliatory strike in North Vietnam. Now bear in mind this question of the use of air power had been under discussion for a year at least, so my recommendation wasn't hitting Washington cold. I had cabled several times that I thought we were playing a losing game since the fall of President [Ngo Dinh] Diem and all the chaos which had followed, and that, sooner or later, we were going to have to avail ourselves of this weapon which had never been utilized, namely our air power.

So I'm sure the President would have said he wasn't surprised to get this cable from me recommending retaliation for Bien Hoa. But as you may recall, that was about two days before the presidential elections at home. I knew that my cable was going to be an unwelcome

Taylor -- III -- 3

message to get in the White House. I don't know that I bet with myself, but I was not surprised when it was turned down. But it was clear in my mind that we should be ready to retaliate for any future incident of this sort. I should remind you that this retaliatory use of air power was a different issue from the larger question of using air power to reduce the war-making, war-sustaining capability in the North.

Then on Christmas Eve, the Brinks incident occurred--a clear case of terrorist action against an American officers' billet. It was very fortunate that the damage was light. But I recommended retaliation again despite the nearness of Christmas. I was much less sympathetic in this case with the negative I got in reply; we should have retaliated then.

Finally when the attack on Pleiku came along, I think I had softened up Washington to some extent by the two previous rejected requests. I had the good luck at the time of Pleiku to have McGeorge Bundy as a visitor from Washington, the first time he had ever been in Vietnam. I had a high regard for McGeorge personally and also knew he had great influence with the President. So when the attack occurred with him on the spot, I discussed it thoroughly with him and he agreed to support my request for retaliation. We got on the telephone and called Washington, got Cy Vance on the telephone, told him what had happened and that we both joined in recommending retaliation. He said, "I'll call you back." To my amazement, within relatively few minutes, less than an hour I would say, an approval came back

Taylor -- III -- 4

authorizing our first overt retaliatory action against the North with air power. Again, it was a symbolic response. It wasn't expected to do much damage, but it started something.

G: That was a rather short reaction time from Washington.

T: Amazingly so, probably because this had been a current matter of debate for weeks and months before.

G: Did you get the feeling that someone in Washington had said, "All right, if they do it one more time we're going to go"?

T: I don't think that happened, but certainly they were ripe for a decision.

G: Now, you have elsewhere documented the fact that you were among the more reluctant officials concerning the decision to send American combat troops to Vietnam. That's borne out in the cables in the Pentagon Papers, and in Swords and Plowshares and elsewhere. I have the impression from some of these documents that Washington on this issue was moving ahead of you in the spring of 1965. Is that true?

T: Well, I think that is true. It had been like pulling teeth to get the President to agree to the use of air power, but strangely enough, he was more inclined to use forces on the ground. The former seemed to me a much less difficult decision to make although both were hard. To go back a little, the attack on Bien Hoa had led to the question of how to defend other airfields, and the President had shown a surprising willingness to entertain the use of American forces to guard these airfields. Well, I wasn't for that. I thought it would have been a very bad decision, and won my case by indicating to

Taylor -- III -- 5

Washington that an airfield is so big that, if the purpose is to keep mortar fire off it, we would need about three battalions of infantry to defend the perimeter. So counting the principle airfields, we would need a very substantial American force for the job. So that killed the matter.

But nonetheless, the President had revealed an attitude which was to reappear later. He readily approved our recommendation to put ashore at Danang the two battalions of Marines which had been afloat off that port. Shortly thereafter, he displayed eagerness to bring in troops faster than had been agreed in recent conferences in Washington. In Saigon, I was caught by surprise to find that warning orders were going out to army and marine units around the world, which indicated that the President was thinking much bigger in this field than I was or than the tenor of recent discussions held in Washington.

G: What do you think was the decisive argument for committing troops?

T: For me it was Westy's insistence that he could not guarantee the safety of Danang without the marines who were offshore. It was Westy's judgment, plus collateral evidence of ARVN weakness entirely consistent with that judgment, that led me to support it.

G: Well, that would explain the motive to defend American installations with American troops.

T: Yes.

G: But it seems to me that there was also an idea right from the first in some circles that we were going to carry out some kind of

Taylor -- III -- 6

counterinsurgency activity with these troupes as well. I believe that decision was taken as early as April 1.

T: I'm not sure I get that clearly.

G: Well, can we distinguish between a defensive mission for these American troops and an offensive one?

T: Not really. I never tried. It may be true that Washington was slow in explaining to the American people why American troops were required. But there can be no question that the first Marines landed to defend Danang. But no thoughtful person would have expected them never to have another mission. When the first army troops came in, it was to improve the defenses of the Saigon region, but again with no inference that they would never pass to an offensive. There was nothing deceptive in the business that I ever perceived.

G: That's pointed to among commentators who were trying to talk about the credibility gap, that officials in Washington sort of used the defense of the airfields as a subterfuge. The nose of the camel. . . .

T: Really? I'd never encountered that. In fact, I never heard that charge made.

G: That the Johnson Administration intended to commit American troops all along and this was an excuse to do it.

Concerning the bombing, which of course is its own controversy, there seems to be a difference of opinion among responsible officials as to what the bombing was supposed to accomplish, even what was the target supposed to be?

Taylor -- III -- 7

T: Well, there was absolutely no excuse for anyone near the President in the decision-making field for not knowing exactly what he had in mind. I stated the purpose of the bombing repeatedly in cables from Saigon. When I came back from being ambassador, I made a hundred and thirty-odd speeches on the Vietnam situation and repeated many times the three reasons we had for initiating the bombing of the North, in order of ascending importance.

The first was to raise the morale in South Vietnam, to give the feeling to the people for the first time they were able to hit the enemy in his home territory who were ravaging the South. I would say the bombing was successful for this purpose at least for a period of time, but no one expected that high morale would last forever. But the bombing was a good thing from the point of view of morale. But that alone did not justify it.

The second purpose was to use air power, to the degree that it could be effective, not to stop the infiltration from the North-- we had no illusion in the world that air power would entirely stop the inflow. But we also knew our aircraft could make it a lot harder for Hanoi's reinforcements, more expensive, more time-consuming to crawl down the trail and not come marching down with bands playing. We accomplished that purpose.

The third purpose was the most important in my judgment. It was to carry out a slow but inexorable barrage of air attacks advancing to the North, capable of convincing the Hanoi government that everything in the Hanoi area was going to be destroyed unless the

Taylor -- III -- 8

leaders mended their ways. Unfortunately, we didn't do it in that way, at least not until the Nixon Administration.

G: What about the argument that we hear from some high-ranking military officers that gradualism, as you have suggested, was quite the wrong way to approach it?

T: Yes, that's correct. From a strictly military point, there was little to recommend the hesitancy with which we used our airpower--a series of short advances of the bombing interspersed with pauses of several days to see how Hanoi would react. It was a far cry from the massive attacks we made against Germany to destroy the enemy and his war-sustaining means just as rapidly as possible.

Yet I supported the gradualism at the start, to feel out the reaction not of Hanoi but of Moscow and Peking. Dean Rusk, by no means a timid man, emphasized the possibility that these great communist powers might be committed by treaty to send forces to the aid of North Vietnam if attacked by a third party. Hence, there was good reason for us to go slow with the bombing at the outset.

But it took only a month or two of a slow advance to convince me at least that neither Peking or Moscow were paying much attention to it. From that time on I was in favor of increasing the magnitude of the attacks and eliminating the pauses between them. That might give the impression of inexorability that was so important. But it didn't turn out that way because there was a strong group of advisers to President Johnson who kept urging the importance of pauses to give Hanoi a chance to send us a signal--of what sort I was never sure. We

Taylor -- III -- 9

didn't need any signal. We didn't need anything, but capitulation. But each time we stopped the bombing, even for twenty-four hours, we lessened whatever psychological value was in the operation.

G: Do you think it would have been possible to destroy Hanoi's ability to support the insurgency in the South?

T: We could have flattened everything in and around Hanoi. That doesn't mean it would stop the war, but it would certainly have made it extremely difficult to continue it effectively. North Vietnam was a highly centralized communist state, and we could have certainly scattered the leadership into the jungles from which it would have been very difficult to conduct their war in the South.

No one ever asked me the question, but of course, our strategy was always militarily unsound. We should never have been fighting the war in the South; we should have been fighting it in the North to begin with.

G: Of course, politically that's another story.

T: Now don't bring in these details.

(Laughter)

G: Red China is not really a detail, I guess.

T: Many times in post-war years in the course of lecturing at war colleges, students have questioned the quality of U.S. strategy in Vietnam. It's hard to defend. At the time of my visit to Vietnam in 1961, why didn't I foresee a long, drawn-out guerrilla war and, to avoid it, recommend a declaration of war against Vietnam and an amphibious operation directed at Hanoi?

Taylor -- III -- 10

I have to admit that it never occurred to me to make such a recommendation. We didn't foresee the toughness and endurance of the North Vietnamese or the ineptitude of the South Vietnamese leaders in unifying their own people and in using the many forms of aid the U.S. would give. Nor did I anticipate the domestic divisions in the U.S. that eventually forced us to abandon our allies and come home in humiliation.

G: Walt Rostow has said that the bombing was more effective after March 31 of 1968 than it was before because it was more concentrated. Would you agree with that?

T: I don't recall that March 31 marked any great change in that.

G: The time when the bombing was limited to the 20th Parallel in 1968.

T: Well, I never felt in that period the bombing was doing any real good although it was better than no bombing at all. It was never really effective until the Nixon Administration, when our air force had their new bombs and much greater latitude in using them.

G: The smart bombs?

T: Yes. Creating the impression we could take out any target and do so quickly and with little pilot exposure.

G: Were you able to keep track of the bombing after the Johnson Administration had left in any way except through the newspapers?

T: I followed the entire situation as best I could. And there's very little you can't follow in the American press. Of course, you get plenty of contradictory bits of so-called information about many events. Since retirement, I think I know about as much about the

Taylor -- III -- 11

military problems of the country in a broad sense as I did when I was chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I am ignorant of a tremendous amount of detail, of course. But what I know is the kind of knowledge the decision-maker needs, whereas as chairman I had to have as much of that as I could assimilate, plus detailed knowledge of the technique, capabilities, and administration of the armed forces.

G: Were there, in retrospect, any crucial personalities, decisions, turning points that you look back on and think, gee, I wish this instead of that? That you wish things had gone another way?

T: Now it's all over, I would say that the following decisions and actions on our part are the most regrettable: a) the dispatch of the August 24, 1963 cable from Washington to Saigon without proper clearance, which resulted in the overthrow and murder of Diem; b) our failure to exploit the victory of Tet and, instead, to treat it as a national defeat; c) our failure to declare war instead of being satisfied with the Tonkin Resolution; d) acceptance of the 1973 cease-fire in Paris which, coupled with subsequent congressional actions, obliged our U.S. forces to withdraw prematurely and thus lost us the war.

I have explained the reasons for my views either in our interviews or in my writings and lectures on these matters.

G: Can I interrupt you right at this point, because chronologically I notice that you didn't mention Laos..

Taylor -- III -- 12

T: Laos was not that important. It's true that, as I indicated in my report in 1961, the settlement we accepted there was a great discouragement to the South Vietnamese because they thought it was a sell-out. I was very unhappy at the time because I didn't think that triad of leadership called for in the settlement could possibly work. Yet actually it didn't turn out badly. Laos was never a major problem to us in Vietnam, except as a territory which we could not enter to prevent it being used as a highway from the North in reinforcing the South.

G: May I posit a thesis with you? Now I'm freewheeling a little bit, but some things that you've said have brought some things to mind. I have seen it said that if the CIA had been allowed to operate in Vietnam the way they operated in Laos, they could have won the whole thing without a commitment of troops. Now, I think I know what your answer to that might be, but I'm going to put it to you anyway.

T: It just makes no sense at all. Whoever said that couldn't have understood a) what the CIA did in Laos; b) what the complexity of the overall problem was in South Vietnam. I never heard a CIA representative ever make such a claim.

G: Well, I'm not sure they said it at the time either. In retrospect it's always easy to. . . .

T: That sounds like [Lou] Conein. Have you been talking to him?

G: No, I haven't found him, but I'm going to. Well, General [Edward] Lansdale has told me he's going to put me on to Conein.

T: Well, it will be an experience to meet him, but for God's sakes, don't believe all he says.

Taylor -- III -- 13

G: Oh, well, the people who read the transcripts will have to make up their own minds about that one.

T: He's a character. He's worth meeting.

G: I understand he's in the area. He's in McLean.

T: Really?

G: I think so. I think so.

Well, General Taylor, I think we have covered the few things I thought we needed to go back over. Is there anything you'd care to add?

T: No, I'm holding nothing back that I know of. I've told you all I know, and that's the time to give up, isn't it?

G: You've been very forthcoming.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of Maxwell D. Taylor

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Maxwell D. Taylor of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted on June 1 and September 14, 1981 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recordings shall not be available for use by researchers during my lifetime. After my death, access to the tape recordings shall be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or quote therefrom.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.

(4) Copies of the interview transcripts, but not the tape recordings, may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the interview transcripts, but not the tape recordings, may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Maxwell D. Taylor
Donor

5/6/83
Date

John H. White
Archivist of the United States

May 19, 1983