

INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 2, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM TRUEHEART

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Ambassador Trueheart's residence, Washington, D.C.

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G: Ambassador Trueheart, can you recall the circumstances of your assignment to the embassy in Saigon?

T: Oh, very well. I was, at the time, in London; I was the political-military affairs officer in the embassy in London. Actually the word came to me when I happened to be in Paris, going over for just a couple of days for some talks with the embassy there, and someone called me--I think it was my wife--from London saying that this message had come through asking if I would accept assignment to Saigon as DCM. Of course, I was very pleased at the offer because it meant becoming a deputy chief of mission, which was regarded as a key sort of promotion in the substantive sense. Of course, it was a relatively big embassy. I hadn't any qualifications for it in terms of knowledge of the area; I'd never served in the Far East. In fact, my last six or seven years had all been in European affairs, largely related to NATO and a little bit of time on the Baghdad Pact. And of course the reason for my assignment was that the Ambassador, [Frederick] Nolting, had specifically requested me. I knew this, too, from the message, although I had not had any private communication from Nolting about it.

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G: Had you known Ambassador Nolting before?

T: I'd known him all my life, just about. Actually, my father worked for his father around 1900 or something, briefly. But then we were at Charlottesville at the same time. He was somewhat older than I, but he'd come back to work on his master's degree in philosophy at the same time that I was completing my bachelor's degree in philosophy. And I saw a great deal of him during that period. As a matter of fact, I was in his wedding, which took place about 1940 or something like that, maybe 1939. Also, he had been in Paris and had been my superior in the NATO delegation. So I presume he asked for me because he thought I could do this sort of a job. I think he probably thought of it more as an executive or management job than, as I say, because I knew anything about Vietnam, which I didn't. Of course, he hadn't either when he went out there. This is of course hearsay, but I believe that he had been urged by others to get a new deputy. There was a general feeling that they ought to have a sort of a new leaf in Saigon.

G: Who had been his deputy before you?

T: A man named Cunningham. I'm not suggesting there was anything unsatisfactory about his performance or with [Elbridge] Durbrow, who had preceded Nolting. But I think the feeling was that many of the people who were there might have in effect blotted their copybook with [Ngo Dinh] Diem, and a conscious decision had been made that the best policy for the United States was to make a new effort to get along

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with Diem and to make the best of what we had. There wasn't anything else in sight that would be better.

So that was the background. Then the timing was that they let me stay on until I had completed two years in London, which was I think in August. Technically I needed to do this in order to be qualified for some home leave. So I did that, and then I came back to Washington and had a couple of weeks of orientation course and a couple of weeks of leave and went out.

G: What kind of preparation did they give you in that orientation?

T: Well, it was very general. I mean, the Foreign Service Institute had a two-week course at that time on Southeast Asia, not simply Vietnam. It was quite general. I can't remember details of it, but obviously it was a very rough cut in terms of orientation. It covered, as I say, not simply Vietnam, but it covered Indonesia, the whole area that was then regarded as Southeast Asia, including the island parts.

G: Now, there are stories that Ambassador Durbrow had had his problems, as you have hinted at, with President Diem. Was there any kind of a consensus in the State Department concerning Diem? Was what you just said the consensus, that he was all that was in sight and we had to--?

T: I'll tell you, I don't think I could say for sure because I didn't have any feeling that there were violent disagreements. There were certainly some people who were very dubious about Diem. In addition to this particular course, I went around and talked to various individuals who were thought to be especially knowledgeable. For example, I called on [Edward] Lansdale, but he was really quite noncommittal in

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talking to me and did not tell me anything that would have reflected the negative report he had made.

G: I was going to ask about that--

T: Well, that reminded me of it, because he gave me several papers that he had written and speeches that he'd made on the subject, but he didn't really tell me much of anything. Now, whether he felt that in effect his comments had been overridden, a decision had been taken, and therefore he'd drop his positions, I don't know. But in fact it was a pretty uninformative kind of a meeting.

G: You're smiling because I suspect is it you didn't get what you expected to get from General Lansdale?

T: No, I'm smiling because I didn't realize at the time, or until long after, anything about this report. Nothing he said to me would have suggested that he had real reservations about what we were doing. I didn't know that he did, really. I still have never seen this report. I'm trying to think whether any of the other interviews I had--

G: Did you talk to any of the military people who had been out there with MAAG?

T: If I did, I don't recall at the moment, but I must have done [so]. I just don't remember who it was. But I'm pretty sure I talked to several people in the Pentagon, I would think.

G: I was thinking perhaps General Williams, Hanging Sam Williams.

T: No, no, I did not talk to him. He's a name I know, but I never met him. Of course, I had meetings with lots of people in Pearl Harbor on the way out. I don't know whether this is the place to throw it in,

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but it was also during this period that I had my one meeting with LBJ.

Is this a good place to throw this in?

G: Proceed, please.

T: Again, it's not much of it to tell except the circumstances might be of some interest. I was back here, bear in mind, scheduled to go to Vietnam to fill a job that needed to be filled and so forth. And in the midst of getting ready to go, I was informed that the State Department had decided that the Vice President really ought to have a State Department adviser. Chester Bowles, who was then the under secretary of state, had specifically been talking to him about it and urging him to do this and had, he thought, pretty well persuaded him to take on somebody with this role. The Vice President was statutorily a member of the NSC and he didn't have a staff that had any background for this sort of role. So they asked me if I would be willing to go and be interviewed for this job. Well, I had really mixed feelings about it because I was keen to go on to Saigon because I thought it fitted in with my career development more than anything else. Yet of course I was tempted by this idea of working for the Vice President.

So, in short, I went over. He had two offices, of course, one in the Capitol and one in the Executive Office Building, I guess, but in any case, he was in his Capitol office. I remember going into a waiting room--there were two or three assistants and secretaries in the outer office--and waiting a very long time, because he had other people with him. I must have waited forty-five minutes or more. [I

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remember] finally being ushered into the inner room, where much to my surprise, not only was the Vice President but his secretary sitting in the same room with him and not too far away. It was a very dark room.

I sat down. As I say, it's the only time I ever spoke to him and I'm sure--he was in his country boy mood. He was acting the simple country boy. I know from what I've been told by many other people who knew him, including Henry Cabot Lodge, that he was a man of enormous mental capacity, a brilliant man. But in this, with me, he simply adopted this country boy approach. He said he was having to go to these NSC meetings and read all these papers about foreign affairs and things and he really couldn't follow them. He needed somebody who could help him to understand what these were all about and so on. But this was the gist of it all. He, of course, asked me about whether I would be interested in something like this, and I said, well, I was, [but] on the other hand I was torn. I had been currently assigned to go to Vietnam, and that it was a job that I was very keen to do and I really didn't know. I had mixed feelings. And he said that he thought he really wouldn't want to do anything to disadvantage the mission in Vietnam, which he thought was so important.

This went on for maybe ten, fifteen minutes, but that was the gist of it. And we parted without anything being said about what was going to happen. When I left, the people in the outer office said, "Don't call us, we'll call you." Well, unfortunately they didn't call me and I was supposed to leave momentarily for Saigon, but until this matter had been resolved, the State Department was not going to let me

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go. So I sat around for perhaps ten days waiting to hear what the Vice President wanted, and he said neither yea nor nay. I was getting very uncomfortable, and finally someone, I think it was [U.] Alexis Johnson, the deputy under secretary for political affairs, who somehow finally got a release from the Vice President's office and out I went.

The job in question I think was not filled for a good many months later. Anyway, that's the LBJ story. We've taken a lot of time on that.

G: Oh, that's quite all right.

T: But anyway, I went to Saigon by way of Pearl Harbor.

G: This was your first trip to the Far East, was it?

T: The truth is I had never been west of Chicago until I'd made this trip.

G: Well, were you prepared for the sights and smells and sounds and the rest of it?

T: Well, Saigon itself was a pretty peaceful city when I got there. This was what, October 1961. This was, of course, after the Johnson visit early in the year and after the [Eugene] Staley mission and so on. When I got there the [Walt] Rostow-[Maxwell] Taylor mission was there. I think they'd arrived a couple of days before, and they were going through their exercise while I was there. The place was peaceful enough. I had two children, one an infant at the time, ten months old, and one about ten years old. We were very comfortably set up in a house that had belonged to my predecessor and there were excellent servants. I've never had a pleasanter arrival at a new post in a physical sense than there.

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There was a big flood at the time; the Mekong was covering most of the Delta. This figured in the Taylor-Rostow mission in the sense that one of the thoughts they had was that perhaps they could bring in a couple of battalions of U.S. engineers to deal with the flood problems that would arise, and this might be a way of getting American forces into Vietnam, which was one of the options, of course, they were thinking about. In that connection, although I had just gotten there, I remember flying out with a brigadier general who was the number two, I guess, or three in the MAAG and flying over this area to see just whether this made any sense, because the general was himself an engineer. [We] came back and concluded--really his conclusion because I wasn't qualified to conclude on the subject--that this was nothing like a flood on the Mississippi or anything in that the water just came up and the people moved up into the trees or whatever. They even moved their cattle up into the trees somehow, and they patiently waited for the water to go down. And it didn't go down rapidly, it didn't come up rapidly. There was not much hardship at all, and in that part of Vietnam they grew a variety of rice which in fact could grow almost as fast as the waters rose. It wasn't the best rice, but it wouldn't flood out. And that proved to be the case.

G: So the conclusion was there was nothing to be done?

T: It didn't make any military or engineering sense to do it. I think that the whole idea of bringing troops in was one that was rejected, although I didn't realize at the time, I realize now, that the Taylor-



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Rostow recommendations included a definite recommendation for bringing in U.S. ground forces, which the President just passed.

G: I wonder why that recommendation was included when the general of engineers rather--?

T: Well, one of the questions you had in mind was whether I had ever seen this report at the time. I did not. I'm not sure anybody in the mission saw it. I think they may have written it on the way home. But the recommendation to bring in troops was a more fundamental recommendation that would involve, as I understand it, the bringing in of troops who would somehow sort of seal the borders or fight off any major incursions from the North, leaving it to the Vietnamese forces to deal with the guerrilla threat. The idea of taking advantage of the flood and bringing in engineers was more of a subterfuge, I mean an idea of whether this might provide a way of doing this, providing an excuse for bringing them in without announcing exactly what the ultimate objective was.

G: They would be combat engineers, in short.

T: Oh, sure, they would have been that.

(Interruption)

G: Let's talk about President Diem for a few minutes. What was the state of relations between Diem and the embassy when you arrived? You said there had been some friction, some trouble?

T: I think that it was really quite good. There had been a conscious decision with Kennedy to try to work with him and not try to exert great pressures on him and to encourage him rather than to leverage

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him. So that I suspect relations were never better or hadn't been better in a long time. On the other hand, the situation had been getting worse and that's why the Taylor mission came out. As I recall it, the VC had captured a province capital for the first time, killed the province chief. But there were obviously differences of opinion about Diem still within the mission, as you mentioned. I think the people who had been there for a long time contained a number who were quite skeptical of the ability of Diem to govern the country or I guess really to win the war, which is what we were all talking about or after. But I felt that I had no way of judging this and I never even tried to form a judgment on that myself for a long time. I accepted that I wasn't sent out there to make judgments about this, I was sent out to help with organizing the embassy and the mission.

G: Were you chiefly concerned with the internal operation of the mission?

T: Well, the mission of course, at least at this point, included everything, including MAAG and their very big USOM or AID mission. As DCM I had purview of the whole business in that sense. And we must come back to this when we talk about the MACV business, which you wanted to go into. But certainly there were definite people in the CIA--not [William] Colby I think, but under him--and in the political section--incidentally, the head of the political section at the time was Joe Mendenhall who later came out with [Victor] Krulak on that thing. He had been there a long time and he had really worked very hard on trying to develop a counterinsurgency plan of action, which had never been implemented. And I think he was very skeptical of the ability of

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the government to do anything along the lines that we were thinking about. I don't really recall much about what [Lionel] McGarr's feeling was. He left not too long afterwards. He was ill really at the end of the year.

G: This was General McGarr, the chief of MAAG, right?

T: Yes. He was the head of MAAG at the time. I believe [Charles] Timmes was his--was he his number two at that time?

G: Yes.

T: He was fairly new. And the third officer, a brigadier who went with me on this trip--suddenly his name has gone out of my head, but he was a very fine officer. I remember Timmes and him; they were able men. But I didn't have any real feel, at that point, that we had any real plan of action. I don't think we did, frankly. They had certainly in the past pursued--the military approach of building up these divisions and so on had been I think badly conceived. I'm not sure any of our programs were, in retrospect, well conceived. Anyway, at the time there were certainly doubting Thomases in the mission, in all parts of it.

G: The popular picture is that the top officials in the mission made an effort to get along with Diem, and that the second and third echelon officials, field men, tended to be very critical and skeptical. Is that too simple a picture?

T: Well, of course the only people dealing with Diem were the top people. I don't think it would be fair to say that the people lower down were trying to undercut what we were doing; they simply intellectually had

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doubts about whether it was going to work or not, on the basis of their own experiences. And what they were hearing, I think many of them had different contacts from the top people and maybe wider, but for that matter there was no shortage of Vietnamese who were ready to tell you that the Diem administration was hopeless. In fact, it was very hard to find anybody who wasn't a member of the regime, or employed by the government, who would have anything good to say about it. The point was that nobody had much respect for these people either. There was plenty of freedom of speech, all right, in this period, and people were busily buttonholing Americans to tell them what was wrong with the government.

G: How long did it take you to form some kind of coherent picture of all this?

T: Well, I don't know that I ever formed a coherent picture, but I didn't really come to firm negative conclusions about Diem until the Buddhist crisis long after--

G: That's later. I don't want to--

T: I think I kept an open mind on this right on through until it seemed to me that we get to that point, which we can deal with later.

G: Was the strategic hamlet program getting underway about the time that you arrived?

T: A little later. It was the only really you might say strategic concept for dealing with the problem that we ever had, at least during my time there. The credit for it really belongs to the British mission, the Thompson mission.

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G: That's R. K. G. Thompson?

T: Yes. Who I knew very well and was a very close personal friend as well at the time. He had a small group there and they had a concept, which was of course really closely modeled on what they had done in Malaysia. He was an adviser to Diem or to the government, just as we were, in this matter. Of course, he knew that we had all the material ability to carry out anything that might be decided and that his advice would be worthless if it wasn't also agreeable to us. So he spent a lot of time with us, and I have vivid recollections of a meeting that Nolting and I had with him in which he laid out the whole idea of the strategic hamlet program, which he had, I believe, already presented to Diem. We were very favorably impressed with it. Subsequently we reported this to Washington, and I think people from Washington came out and they were also briefed directly by Thompson. I think there was fairly quickly agreement that this was a sound approach in counter-insurgency. The U.S. military supported it, too. Not to the exclusion of everything else, I think they clearly thought of it as an adjunct to more--it wasn't our main goal, but they were prepared to do what was necessary, [what] they could do with it, but it wasn't the center of their focus as it was, say, USAID's or as it was in at least my own mind.

G: Did someone on the mission have particular responsibility for liaison on this program?

T: Well, eventually. In fact, fairly soon, and I think fairly early in 1962 we set up a committee which was actually called the Trueheart

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Committee, of all things, and I was the chairman of it and we met weekly, or sometimes twice a week, with all agencies, with the idea of reviewing progress in this program. And supposedly, although I never saw the minutes of any of its meetings, there was a parallel committee in the Vietnamese government headed by [Ngo Dinh] Nhu, which was supposedly looking after their side of it. But the connection between these two groups was very tenuous, if it existed at all. But we gradually--and I'm sure by the time you were there it was much more of this--were getting USOM advisers in each province and military advisers in each province.

A typical meeting of this committee would be, we'd begin probably by having these two guys up from one province or another and have them report on what the situation was and the problems and how things were going, freely questioning them and so on. Heads of each agency would report how much barbed wire did we get last, all this sort of thing. We never had the kind of statistics that were later developed by [Robert] Komer and all that sort of thing, but we were trying to get some feel for it. We hadn't anything we could really put numbers to very confidently, more or less. But this was perhaps my main job, in a way, was trying to do this. I must say, in 1962 I thought we made a fair amount of progress on this; we reported as much. But it's a pretty subjective feeling, very hard to judge, and I'm not sure in retrospect that we weren't just encouraged by what we were doing, because we were certainly doing a lot. There were a lot of fences being built and all sort of--I made quite a few trips to the countryside, as did many

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others. We may have been primarily judging the fact that we were getting on with our program rather than what real effect it was having on cutting off the Viet Cong from the population, which is what we were trying to do. Certainly it collapsed very rapidly in 1963 [inaudible].

G: Didn't Rufus Phillips become involved in this once?

T: Rufus Phillips was one of the people in the USAID who always attended these meetings. Have you interviewed him?

G: Not yet.

T: Well, I would. He'd be a very good one to interview and had a lot more knowledge of the country. I would urge you not to skip him. But within AID he was the guy who was primarily responsible for the strategic hamlet program.

G: He was an old China hand, wasn't he?

T: Well, not so much a China hand I think, but he had been a Lansdale man in the 1954 period and in close contact not only with Diem but with lots of people who were still around, either in the government or outside the government. So he had that sort of rapport that some other people like--well, another, of course, key man who was not on this committee but with whom I had a lot of dealings was Lucien Conein from the CIA. But he had even longer contacts with the Vietnamese.

G: He's around town somewhere, isn't he?

T: Oh, yes. He's done a lot of testifying on the coup and whatnot. I suppose that stuff is available in the minutes of the intelligence [committee], the [Frank] Church Committee.

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But in any case, this committee had representatives from each agency, and it was a kind of an effort to coordinate the U.S. support for the strategic hamlet program.

G: Is it fair to say then that the hamlet program as a whole satisfied your committee as to its rate of progress?

T: It did I'd say right on through 1962. We thought we were making real headway. As I say, just what was really happening, I'm not so sure, in retrospect. But at the time, we felt that we were on sound ground in reporting that it was making progress.

G: What kind of yardstick did you have? You have said so many fences built, so much barbed wire laid and so forth.

T: Well, as I say, it was pretty subjective. It was going out and getting briefed by a province chief and the American advisers and being shown and seeing some of the local dignitaries and whatnot. But what we always thought would be a real test would be if you could say, "Well, okay, here's a province which is pacified, clear, where you can go out day and night and feel safe." Well, I always felt until we could have one of those, we really couldn't be quite sure. We never got anybody ready to say that about any province. Then, as I say, things I think really began to fall apart in 1963. To what extent this was related to the Buddhist matter, I wouldn't say. I doubt if it was. I doubt it.

G: Now, you've said that 1962, at least from all you could tell, was a pretty good year for the strategic hamlet program. I think that year



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there were also some developments in the military area; some new equipment had arrived, I think, helicopters in substantial numbers.

T: Yes.

G: Were you up to date at the time on the impact of this on the military situation?

T: Well, to some degree. There weren't very many battalion-size engagements in 1962 if I remember right. My main recollections of the military side were the problems we had in large measure with the press and so on connected with the introduction of all this equipment, which came in, I recall, onboard these converted aircraft carriers which would anchor at the foot of Tu Do Street and unload these things. We were stopped from confirming that they were there because--this is something, incidentally, which I don't think you've mentioned in your questions but maybe it's worth mentioning here.

In carrying out the Taylor-Rostow recommendations and bringing in this new equipment and bringing in additional people, we were clearly exceeding the limits agreed upon in the Geneva accords and subsequently. Of course, so was the other side. But it was the position of the U.S. government that we were not going to be convicted out of our own mouths of having violated this agreement. We were going to violate it and not make much bones about it, but we were not going to confirm this so that we could later be in effect convicted out of our own mouths in the United Nations or whatever. And for that reason, when a newspaperman would ask, "What's that down at the foot of the street here?" the general answer was "No comment." This was interpreted by

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them as an effort to conceal from the American public what we were doing. It was in general a very unforthcoming way with the press. But I was certainly very conscious, because it had this political angle, of what we were bringing in and what some of the problems were. I'm bound to say, at least my memory is not good as to what, if anything, I knew about what they were doing with the equipment as they turned it over to the Vietnamese. I knew we were also, of course, flying the Farm Gate airplanes. There were many questions about whether in fact there was always a Vietnamese in the back seat or the front seat or whichever seat he was supposed to be in.

G: This was a hot political question, was it not?

T: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That was more than just a technical question. It could have been in terms of the. . . .

G: Didn't they sometimes call the Vietnamese aboard a sandbag?

T: Yes. I think that certainly there were claims that the Vietnamese copilot often had never been off the ground before, much less not being a pilot. That sort of thing arose. This Ap Bac battle which you mentioned, I remember that rather vividly because at the time what's-his-name was out there from the [State Department], Roger Hilsman, and he went on this operation and is an ex-West Pointer. He thought it was just the worst operation he had ever seen.

G: I didn't know that he observed the Ap Bac battle.

T: He did. Oh, yes.

G: I see.

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T: I'm pretty sure he did. You could look it up in his book but I have an idea he did observe it. In fact, I think he may have been even staying with me at my house while he was there. But in any case, this seemed to show that the Vietnamese military operations were not all they might be, but I don't recall it being--it was a sort of a flash in the pan as far as I was concerned. I didn't think much more about it.

G: It got an awfully big play in the press, I think.

T: Oh, yes. But as much as anything I think it got a play because [Paul] Harkins made statements that it was really a victory or something, and this was so patently not the case that it just infuriated the press. So many things that were going on infuriated them. But in any case, I didn't really have a close knowledge of what was going on in terms of training troops and that sort of thing.

G: I see.

T: When certain operations such as we were talking about were involved that had political angles, things like the use of defoliants and that sort of thing, I was involved with this and have rather vivid recollections of some of it.

G: Would you tell us about that? What were the questions involved when the proposal for use of defoliants came up, for example?

T: Well, there were two aspects of it: one, clearing ground to make ambushes more difficult, clearing the area around the military installations and so on, which didn't, at least in my mind, raise any serious problems, although I gather that it raised lots of questions

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back here more about whether this might be interpreted as chemical warfare or something. But it seemed to me on the spot to be a perfectly sensible thing to do, if in fact it was effective in preventing ambushes. I think in practice there was some question whether it was very useful. But the other point on crop destruction, I had very strong views on this against it, again on practical grounds, that it was not effective. If you destroyed crops, the only people that would be hurt would be the non-VC, because you could be sure the VC would get any food that was around to be eaten, and that you were simply going to be alienating the people that you were hoping to have on your side. With no better control over the countryside than you had, there was no way of, in effect, targeting these operations against the VC themselves. And this was I think basically also the view of the Thompson mission.

We once had a meeting on this, because this was something that Diem was very much in favor of doing. I remember one meeting we had with I suppose it would have been Harkins and Nolting and several people perhaps from MACV, and I was along and Diem and I don't know who else on the Vietnamese side. In this meeting Nolting encouraged me to express my view. He didn't agree with me but he urged me to make it known, and I did but it didn't have any effect. Diem, at a very early point, had heard that this was a possibility and was keen to use it. You may have heard there is a new air force historical study on this whole thing. I went down the other day to look at this study to see whether it took my name in vain and found that it didn't.

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(Laughter) But I just glanced at the first parts of it; it was that thick, you know.

G: You mean, they didn't use your name at all or they used it the way it should be used?

T: Didn't use it at all. (Laughter) Well, that's understandable because I think they're working from records of--

G: Operational--

T: --official communications of various kinds and I don't think my views were ever recorded anywhere unless they were--

G: Your dissent went unnoticed as far as the air force is concerned?

T: Yes. But anyway, now I have it on the record.

G: Good. Well, were there other problems of a similar nature? What about gas, the use of riot control gas?

T: I don't recall that as being an issue that we ever got involved with in the mission itself. The only thing, there was some kind of use of tear gas that burned somebody in Hue or something in this Buddhist business, but that wasn't even American tear gas, as I recall, but some French stuff that the Vietnamese had had on hand. But I don't recall it as being a major issue during the time I was there, nor am I aware that there was much use of it. Bear in mind, I left at the beginning of 1964, and the fighting war was pretty slight up [to that point].

G: How about Laos? How did the situation in Laos affect the situation in Vietnam? What was their relationship?

T: Well, go back to my first--this was terra incognita to me. As far as we were concerned in Vietnam, the peace agreement in Laos we felt in

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effect sort of freed up Laos as a corridor for the VC to move into Vietnam. So that looked at from our rather worm's eye view, we couldn't see anything good about what had happened in Laos. We of course wondered if the thought was for some sort of similar neutralization of Vietnam, in Washington, whether that was contemplated. But these were not things that I thought a lot about; I don't know to what extent Nolting did.

G: Did the word neutralization have a special meaning where Laos was concerned then? Was it another name for a communist takeover?

T: Well, I think we sort of assumed that would be the end result of it, yes. But I think the conventional wisdom, or some of the conventional wisdom, was that President Kennedy had in effect taken this decision in Laos, but that in having done so and having taken a lot of criticism for having done this, that he was all the more determined not to make similar concessions in Vietnam. Nothing that was going on at that time led us to believe that in fact a similar policy was envisaged for Vietnam. But again, I don't recall that as being a very major topic of conversation.

G: I had heard from several sources that Diem was very disturbed by the settlement in Laos because he thought it might be a harbinger of what his fate would be.

T: Well, he may have been, but I don't recall his saying anything about this. But let me say a word about Diem in this, my general impressions of him in the early part of my tour there. I would go along oftentimes with the Ambassador. Sometimes when he was not there or

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sometimes even when he was there and a distinguished visitor would come through, [we would] take him over to visit Diem. I must say, most of these visits were more or less courtesy calls, but they were unlike any courtesy calls I've ever seen anywhere else. They lasted four hours and more and were always a monologue by Diem, nobody else ever got a word in, and they were always almost the same thing: a long lecture on the history of Vietnam and the history of Ngo Dinh Diem. You literally could go through--you'd come out of one of these meetings with the chief of state and have absolutely nothing to report, because nothing new had been said. I must have gone to dozens of such meetings and that was all that ever transpired.

G: Did you develop a kind of a shorthand to describe--?

T: We didn't even bother to report them, which I think says more than anything else, considering normally you would make the most extensive kind of a telegram or whatever. But [we had] long since stopped trying to report these meetings.

G: How did you stay awake?

T: Well, there was a lot of tea provided, and he was always speaking French, which tended to keep me awake trying to make sure I was following him. Of course, this doesn't apply to a few meetings I had with him when I was charge in the time of the Buddhist crisis.

G: Did Diem have any English?

T: I think he did understand English quite well, but he never used it. But I think he understood it all right. Of course you know he spent more than a year in this country.

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G: Yes. Now, the military side of the mission was reorganized into MACV--

T: Yes.

G: --early in 1962, I believe. What was involved there? What was behind that?

T: Well, let me say first, I think we in the embassy, Nolting himself and I, were very concerned at this, for two reasons, really. One, we thought it tended to overemphasize the military aspects of the problem, which we thought was fundamentally a political problem. Secondly, it meant something very clear in bureaucratic terms about the control of the U.S. operations in Vietnam. Under existing presidential directives, an ambassador had supervisory authority over all U.S. agencies and elements in the country except military commands, which reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense directly. So that one couldn't help feeling that this was in fact a move by the military to get out from under any formal control by the mission. So this, in a fairly simplistic way but I think this is really the guts of it, was very worrisome to Nolting and he fought it to the extent of coming back to Washington and protesting it. But he did not get any support from the Secretary of State in this, and I think he seriously considered resigning over this issue but in the end decided not to.

But the actual relationship between the Ambassador and MAVC was never, as I recall, formally clarified. In fact, Harkins certainly deferred in every sort of protocol way to the Ambassador, and I think they in fact got on very well together and so forth. But I don't



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think there was ever really during this period--and perhaps not ever, but certainly not in this period--the clear authority that the chief of mission had let's say in the time of [Ellsworth] Bunker. Although I'm bound to say, when Lodge came there was no question at all about who was in charge. This was a matter of his own--

G: So there was worry in the mission?

T: Yes, worry that this was in effect going to militarize this problem and seek a military solution, which we felt was not the way to go.

G: Did that happen to any extent during your tenure there?

T: Well, no, because--well, yes, to some extent because, after all, the military became much more numerous and so on. And I have a feeling that in the 1963 period, when the military clearly did not agree with what we were doing in terms of--by the military I mean Harkins and so on--the kind of pressures we were putting on Diem about the Buddhist business, there was a lot of effort to undermine what the civilian mission was doing.

G: In what way?

T: Well, I don't think I can document this very well. I think you'll find, though, that in the coup period, about the first of September to the first of November, there were back-channel things going on. Perhaps in that way we were not giving a clear-cut signal to the Vietnamese as to whether we were all together. But I can't really document this; it's more of a suspicion than anything else.

G: Okay. As I recall, there was an attempt on Diem's life early in 1962, in February.

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T: Yes.

G: Should we attach a lot of importance to that subsequently?

T: No, I don't think so. It happens that I was in Bangkok when this happened. But we thought of it at the time, since nothing else happened, as a sort of isolated act. And nothing else occurred. There it was, sort of in between two different things. There had been the real coup attempt in what, 1960, and then you had the 1963 period when something seemingly more minor than this occurred and had lots of repercussions. So it just didn't seem to have any connection with anything else and didn't provoke anything else. So I didn't at the time and don't now attach any significance. Never heard anybody else make much of it.

G: I'd heard that Diem forbade any airplane to take off carrying bombs for a time.

T: Well, yes, I think that's true, that no five-hundred-pound bombs could take off without written permission from him. But I don't think I knew that at the time. I suspect that somebody in MACV knew about it.

G: I think the press got wind of it.

T: Yes. But I didn't know it and I don't to this day know whether it's true or not. But it certainly would have been in character I think.

G: Now, in July there was one of many conferences in Honolulu.

T: July 1962?

G: July 1962, right.

T: I think I went to that.

G: Okay. I was going to ask you.

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T: Did I, do you know?

G: Well, I have here that Secretary [Robert] McNamara went, General Harkins and Ambassador Nolting. I haven't been able to establish whether you went to that one or not.

T: I think I did, but I don't think I took any active part in it, but I think I was there.

G: Well, I know that they announced that there had been considerable progress made, that the strategic hamlet program was going great guns. And I just wondered if you had participated in it.

T: Well, I might have said a word or two, but I don't recall it. But certainly, as I've told you, that would have been my feeling at the time.

G: Okay. Then General Taylor came over in September, I believe, and visited and he made a similar assessment. The point I'm coming to is that Senator [Michael] Mansfield came over late in 1962--I don't have an exact date--and he reported that the situation was worse than it had been in 1955, which on the face of it sounds rather contradictory. But I'm not sure if that had any repercussions in the mission.

T: I remember the Mansfield visit very well but for somewhat peculiar reasons.

G: Well, tell us about that.

T: We had this meeting with his group, which included a number of people from the Foreign Relations Committee, including, as I remember, Senator [Claiborne] Pell, who is incidentally, you may know, an ex-Foreign Service officer and somebody I had known before he was in the Senate.

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At some point in this sort of go-around, rather informal session, although Mansfield tended to be pretty formal in any meeting of this kind, Pell said, "Well, look, what about this?" We were talking about support for Diem rather than talking about the progress of the strategic hamlet program or whatever, and Pell said, "What about this? What do you think, if there were an election in Vietnam today, how would Diem come out?" And for some reason Fritz, Ambassador Nolting, said, "Why don't you answer that, Bill?" (Laughter) I said, "Well, you know, I'm not sure that's a meaningful question because I honestly think that if you really went out in the boondocks of this country I'm not sure that half the people know who Diem is, if you really mean the peasants." This was not said in levity, but I think that Mansfield may have thought I was making light of this and he was rather irritated by this. I think Pell was maybe more so, but anyway, he said, "Well, I don't take that. Diem has been head of this country for a long time" and so forth, and we went on to other subjects.

But why I mention this is because I recall then that we saw them all off at the airport a few days later. Meanwhile, of course, Mansfield has been talking to a lot of other people, including, I'm sure, a lot of the press there. We were all standing around in a big circle there, and Mansfield walked all the way across the room, came up, shook my hand, and he said, "I think you're right." (Laughter)

G: You mean he had confirmed your view?

T: He had come to the same conclusion but it was--and maybe he was thinking I was going to vote for him sometime, but I don't think [so].

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But I think what happened with Mansfield was that he had talked to a lot of people in the lower ranks of the mission probably, and above all I think he'd talked to a lot of the press. Of course, he was a very astute man and he had been following this situation a very long time. I don't know if--did he say compared with 1955?

G: He said it was worse than 1955, yes.

T: Yes. Well, in many senses it obviously was. I mean, if you took it in terms of the VC situation in the country, it was much worse then. I think that the popular support for Diem was certainly markedly less by this time than it had been in 1955.

G: To what would you ascribe that in general?

T: Well, two things: one, of course, the real Hanoi effort to reactivate the VC and so on didn't really get under way until about 1960. Certainly in 1955, when there hadn't even been the 1956 proposed election there [?]. So that's one thing, there hadn't been the time. In 1955 they might even have thought they would have an election or something. And then the other thing, of course, was that Diem had just been around in effect mismanaging things for a long time by this [time], and even if he had been doing better than he had been, I think he would still have--any leader is likely to have lost a lot of support, [even] if he's been doing anything useful, in that length of time.

G: There's a lot of controversy over the useful things that Diem had been doing. Was there any flavor of that left over, his supposedly oppressive methods and techniques for consolidating his power?

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T: You mean like the treatment of the Cao Dai and that sort of thing?

G: Yes.

T: I wasn't aware of it. It wasn't a major thing that I could detect, but I wasn't very knowledgeable about the situation. But those particular sects were pretty well confined to two provinces, really, in the Delta area. They weren't nationwide groups and I don't know that they had much following in Saigon at all. Of course the Binh Xuyen, or whatever they were, were more of a criminal group.

G: What about dissent in general? How did Diem handle dissent?

T: Well, he just didn't tolerate it. And to what extent--you know, we later discovered that there were a lot of political prisoners in the country, but this was not an active issue until the Buddhist thing when a lot of students and so on got arrested. But I remember after the coup, some people sort of came up out of the ground; they had been in prison for years and there were some real horror tales on this. But this had not somehow--at least it doesn't stick in my memory that it was a major issue during my time there.

G: Okay. In 1963, now you've talked about Ap Bac somewhat.

T: Yes, and I've told you all I really have on that.

G: General Harkins used to call it Oh, My Aching Back.

T: Oh, really?

G: Yes.

T: But you know, at the end he said that, well, it was a success because the Vietnamese--

G: Retook the village.

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T: --had reached their objective.

G: Now in 1963, let me go to April, because I believe it was in that month that Diem announced that he would like the number of Americans in Vietnam reduced. Was there anything significant to that?

T: Well, I saw that [in your questions]. I don't really recall that as something coming directly from Diem. Perhaps it's not worth our discussing, because I don't remember that. I wonder, was it simply one of these stories in the Times of Vietnam that might have been just planted by Nhu or something?

G: Well, that's conceivable, of course. I think it was a newspaper headline.

T: Because I certainly don't recall that we had an official request at that time. This is early 1963?

G: Yes, about April, I think.

T: I don't recall we had such a request. I don't have enough--I could be mistaken.

G: Okay. I believe it is correct that later in May, about the twenty-second, that President Kennedy announced that we would withdraw some Americans if the South Vietnamese suggested that we did, and I thought that these two things might be related.

T: Yes, as I say, I thought about the same things when I read your questions. But I wonder myself if he was responding to some, in a press conference, question, and that he would naturally say if they want, we [will withdraw Americans]. I just don't recall. I recall a later time when Nhu made some more direct statements of this kind, and

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for much greater reduction, but that one is one that I don't ring a bell on.

G: That's fine. It's also about this time that the Buddhist demonstrations I think begin. What's behind that? There was a lot of confusion in the newspapers about what was going on.

T: Well, you know, this has all been written up over and over again and I don't know to what extent I can add anything to it. But you remember they were going to have a celebration of Buddha's birthday. It was forbidden by the local authorities in Hue and they did it anyway, and there was an effort to break it up and shooting and several people were killed and so on. It came as a great surprise to us. I'm not sure we had been aware in the mission that there was to be a [demonstration]. We had a consul in Hue, he may well have reported it, but I don't at this time remember whether we knew that this march was scheduled, had been forbidden, and whatnot. The first we heard about it was when we heard that these people had been killed and there had been quite a to-do. I know that Nolting was quite concerned about it at the time and he made the first approach, as I recall, to Diem about it, urging him to damp it down by doing what you would normally think of doing: investigate, punish the guilty, recompense the injured and whatnot. But he was about to go on his leave and I think he may have feared that this would get out of hand, but I don't think anybody seriously thought that the odds were great that we would develop into anything very serious. The whole idea of the Buddhists was something that had never occurred to us, frankly, that they were a force to be



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reckoned with or that they even had a position. And I don't think they did. I mean, this simply became a handy umbrella under which all the latent opposition to Diem could gather. Of course, the great majority of the people in Vietnam were nominally Buddhists, all right, but it wasn't a religious matter at all, it was a political matter and dealt with by Diem in a very inept way.

G: Were we urging him to be conciliatory then?

T: Yes, from the very beginning, I mean, in the sense I'm talking about. And of course more and more urging, because it was undermining, we felt, his position in the country and undermining our support for him. I don't know where you were at the time this was all going on, but the position in this country, as I understood at least from a distance, just made it impossible for Kennedy and the government here to continue to support this kind of oppression of people burning themselves up in the streets. For whatever reason, Diem would simply not do anything-- it was always too little and too late.

G: When did the Ambassador go on his leave?

T: Well, it must have been in May, late May, I can't remember. But it must not have been too long after this event. I would guess it was-- it was the eighth of May, wasn't it, the big affair in Hue? I would have thought he left two or three weeks after that.

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G: [We were] just beginning to talk about what I take is a very crucial period and very eventful summer of 1963 when Ambassador Nolting went on leave and left you with your hands full in Saigon. Were you

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dealing directly then with Diem in the manner more or less that Nolting had been?

T: Yes, although I don't think I actually saw Diem more than two or three times directly on this matter. There is something in a piece that came out some time ago, there's something in this book of Mecklin's about seeing him almost daily and all that.

G: That's John Mecklin's book [Mission In Torment]?

T: Yes. This is a gross exaggeration. I didn't see him more than, as I say, I think probably two or three times. [They were] always rather crucial meetings but they were very short meetings in which I tried to deliver--I was delivering really on instructions--rather ominous sort of warnings that he must do something to bring this matter under control because it was undermining our ability to support him. And what we were recommending, really, was the same things we always were, [which] was some acknowledgement that the government had done wrong and offer to compensate and so on. And this was the kind of thing that they would never do.

G: How did he react to that sort of advice?

T: Just blank.

G: Stonewall?

T: No argument, no nothing.

G: What did this do to you in your state of mind and your evaluation of the situation?

T: I concluded, in the course of this, that we couldn't win with Diem because it was clear to me that he was rapidly losing the support of

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his own people because of this and the way he was handling this. These demonstrations were just growing all over the country. It was also--I guess I was trying to see it from the Washington point of view, that it was making it impossible for us to support him. You asked in your written questions whether it would have been different if Nolting had been there. Well, it might have been. I don't really think, though, that he would have been able to persuade Diem to do anything about this. He wasn't [able], when he did come back, [to do] anything significant on it.

G: Let me ask you about the demonstrations. Now, the picture that we got at home was that the big cities were full of unrest and so on.

T: It got worse and worse. The students got involved at a later point and this was particularly alarming, it always is, because these students all have parents and they're usually parents in high positions. But the Buddhists themselves were simply conducting these sort of peaceful sit-downs in the city, in Saigon. Those are the only ones I saw; they were conducting them in other [cities].

G: How was this affecting the countryside?

T: Well, in terms of the strategic hamlet programs, I'm not sure it affected it much at all. I don't think that there's any showing at all that the communists were involved in this thing. If you mean by the countryside, not Danang and Nha Trang or bigger, My Tho or whatever, but really the real boondocks, again, I'm not sure how much they knew about this or were involved. I think it was primarily an urban business. But the point was that it was affecting the ability of Diem

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to govern and to conduct any kind of effective operation against the VC. But we know in retrospect that the hamlet situation was deteriorating badly in the Delta particularly during this period, but I don't myself tend to relate this directly to the Buddhist thing. I think it probably relates to defects in the way in which the program was carried out. I mean, it was too many; they were just building hamlets. You didn't go into this, incidentally, but that was our main problem with the Vietnamese side of the hamlet program was that they were not conducted in a systematic ink spot method or whatever, moving from secure areas outward, but just trying to build hamlets willy-nilly, wherever, all over. Nhu never would listen to any advice on this point.

G: I think you refer to the oil blot concept of spreading security out from a secure area.

T: Yes. Yes. That's what. I think the fact that this began to come apart in 1963, as we think we know now it did, was primarily the result of that rather than being a part and parcel of the Buddhist crisis.

G: You don't think they're related then?

T: Well, I don't. Perhaps they are, but I don't think so.

G: Well, that's interesting, because some people do find that a rather facile connection to make.

T: It could be, but I don't see it that way.

G: Were you getting any feedback from MACV as to what the effect of all this was on the army?

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T: Well, we were getting reports from province military people and military province advisers about serious deterioration in the security situation in their areas, particularly in the Delta. And we were also getting, for the first time, efforts by MACV not to let these people report what they were seeing.

G: How were you getting it if MACV was trying to block it?

T: We were getting it through--there were other people down there in the provinces as well as [the military]. You'd get it from, say, the AID adviser. I think by this time we had a number of State Department language officers out in the field and [we were] getting it through them. The military people, their counterparts, were talking to them, but they really were not reporting through channels because it wasn't upbeat.

G: I see.

T: You know how--you were in the army.

G: I was, yes, sir.

T: There was very strong pressure at that time in Vietnam on the younger officers to be positive.

G: Yes. Was John Paul Vann a good example of the dilemma involved?

T: He was one that wasn't as positive as he might have been. But there were some others, and as I say, I know of a couple, but I think there were probably quite a few whose careers were blighted by some really specific efforts to do them in the eye on their reports because they didn't follow the right kind of [line].

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G: Did you ever know a Colonel Daniel Boone Porter? Did he cross your trail at some time in this connection?

T: I think so. Where would he--?

G: He was a senior adviser; he was a corps adviser I believe in what was then III Corps, which was the Delta. He was the boss of John Paul Vann and another lieutenant colonel named [Jonathan] Ladd, I believe.

T: I think I did know him; I must have known him. There were several others that I knew better but--when did I see that? I think I probably knew him but I don't have any vivid recollection. I'm pretty poor about names.

G: Well, I thought he might be interesting because he was between General Harkins and Vann, and I understand that he thought a good deal of Vann, which would put him in a very difficult position indeed.

G: Well, Vann was kind of untouchable in a way, partly because I think he was ready to turn in his suit and did do so. But for someone who wanted to make his career in the army, I thought--the independent approach, as you know, is more difficult.

G: What dealings did you have with the press during that rather difficult summer?

T: Well, I had a lot of dealings with them, and some rather unpleasant ones, because of course they didn't know what we were doing and always assumed we were not doing enough or not putting enough heat on Diem from their point of view. And there were a couple of physical dustups with the press where I made protests, but not always making them to their satisfaction, at a high enough level or whatever.

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G: Are you referring to a confrontation between [Neil] Sheehan and [David] Halberstam and some of Diem's police?

T: I'm not sure whether I'm thinking about that one or not. I don't think it's [on] that one that this arose. There were quite a few of these things. But as a general observation, I concluded sometime during this same period that these guys' reporting over the time had been a lot more accurate than ours had been, and that's my judgment now. There are a lot of reasons for this, I'm sure, but I don't think that--and they were certainly a constant problem for the embassy because they made it more difficult for us in our dealings with the government.

G: The government resented this?

T: Yes. But in fact I think their information and reporting on what was going on in the countryside and in the country was on the whole more accurate than what we were reporting from the embassy.

G: Does that include both the State Department and the military side?

T: Well, yes. But I don't know to what extent--I don't feel I know as much about what the military reporting was in any detail, purely military point, but I suspect that it would also apply there. When you're carrying out an operation you're inevitably much more aware of what you're doing than you are of anything else. You're preoccupied with your own actions and the things that are [happening]. And I'm sure you're predisposed to think it's working, if you have any choice in the matter. I think that because their position was what it was, and where they didn't have this same preoccupation, in practice they

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had a broader view and a better view of what the real situation was than we did.

G: Now, you said that sometime that summer you concluded that Diem was not the answer, that we couldn't win with him.

T: Yes, I had concluded this long before Nolting came back. And I never changed; I still feel that.

G: Were there alternatives? That was always the question, of course: yes, Diem is not very good but who else is there?

T: We didn't have any real basis--there was nobody we could point to and say this guy will do a better job. In fact, most of the people we knew, we'd always said, and even at this point I still would have said, I don't have any guarantee that anybody else will do better but we can be sure that this man will lose. It was that sort of reasoning only and recognizing that it was a chance that you would be moving to something even worse. But if it's not going to work, you don't start putting more money on the table. Of course, I felt this even more strongly in, say, 1965; [I was] bitterly opposed, but wasn't then in any direct involvement. I was bitterly opposed to sending any sort of ground forces into the country, because by that time it seemed to me pretty clear that there wasn't anybody that was going to do a better job than Diem.

Fundamentally the problem was that--and I came to these conclusions; I don't want to say I felt these when I was there because I don't know just when some of these ideas developed. But I think the problem was that every head of government in Vietnam, starting with



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Bao Dai and going through Diem and so on, not one of these leaders right on up to [Nguyen Van] Thieu ever really regarded himself as the governor of Vietnam. He regarded himself as administering the country for somebody else. Let me go on. Not one of these people looked for his support, his ultimate support in office, to the people of the country. They all looked to France or to us as the source of their power, and they were administering the country. This is certainly not something that I felt early on; I'm not sure when I came to this conclusion.

But I think this was the basic problem. That being the case, the more we did, in a way, the more that we made this even more true. The more involved the United States became, the more it became impossible for whoever was the nominal ruler of the country to be a real ruler, in fact and in the eyes of the people of the country. So it was a true dilemma. There never was any chance of this thing working, in my opinion now, unless you mean that we were prepared to occupy the country, which I never conceived the United States would support politically, doing something of this kind. Even that might not have worked.

But as I say, I think I was always opposed to any further involvement from the time I left there. By the time I got home--I took a long way home--Big [Duong Van] Minh had already been overthrown.

G: Yes, and [Nguyen] Khanh had--

T: Khanh had taken over. So that I always wondered just how that particular coup took place. I always wondered if in fact our military had

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any hand in this. But be that as it may, if anybody had any popular support in the country, it was probably Big Minh. But certainly none of the others did.

G: It sounds like you're saying the trouble with the leaders of Vietnam was that they weren't politicians.

T: Sure.

G: In the true sense of the word.

T: That's right. The whole conception of getting their support from the governed which, whatever you may say about the VC, that's where they got it from, by whatever means. This was not something that Diem ever understood. Nhu had some sort of charades that he played with organizations of various kinds, and Madame Nhu had some of hers, but these were shams.

G: A lot of people who have written on this subject seem to think that the raids on the pagodas in August of 1963 were a sort of a climax, a breaking point of some kind.

T: Oh, well, that's true, that's true. That really cut it as far as we were concerned, because it was obviously trying to pre-empt the situation. It was done between the departure of Nolting and the arrival of Lodge. It was a clear violation of the kind of at least public and private assurances they had been giving within Vietnam and to us. It made it impossible for almost anybody to support [Diem]. It undermined any possibilities of support within this country.

G: You mentioned that they had been giving us some private assurances. Had they given them to Nolting when he came back?

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T: Well, I think before he left that he had been given assurances that they would not do anything of this kind. I can't document that, but I think it is documented somewhere that he was assured that they would not take any violent measures against the Buddhist religion or the movement or whatever. You know, he [Diem] made his public statement about the same time to Maggie Higgins, [which] was something to the effect that his policy of reconciliation with the Buddhists was irreversible, which is kind of an ambiguous, cryptic statement, or so I regarded it, but others took it as meaning this was a great concession on his part. But that was certainly a benchmark in all this. I think that from that point on there was not really any serious effort to get behind Diem again. I mean, we were, from that point on, ready to at least acquiesce in his departure.

G: What was Ambassador Nolting's frame of mind when he came back into this unsettling situation?

T: Well, he was very upset. I know that he was upset with me, although he never directly said this to me. I've never complained in any way about anything he may have done with me for my career, and I don't want to say anything now about it. It's a very painful thing to me, because we were friends for so many years. He's godfather to both of my children, and I don't have any ill will against him, but I'm sure he's very disappointed. I think he felt that my responsibility during his absence was to him, whereas I felt my responsibility was to Washington when I was in charge during his absence. I did not think that I should be guided during his absence by doing what I supposed he

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would do. I'm not sure what he would have done. He might well have done what I did, but I don't know that. In any case, that's about all I want to say on that unless there's something--

Beyond this, the months that followed were months that really were involved with wondering how on earth the U.S. could carry out a policy there.

G: Now, we have I think a sequence here of three events which go together. The first were the raids on the pagodas, then the departure of Ambassador Nolting.

T: He had departed.

G: Yes, that's right, he had departed before the raids. Then the arrival of Ambassador Lodge. There's a famous quote I think by Madame Nhu. When she found that Lodge was coming, she was supposed to have said, "They have sent us a proconsul," very distressed at the fact apparently. What changed when Ambassador Lodge arrived? Did the style of ambassadorship change?

T: Oh, yes. It grossly changed. He came out and met in Honolulu with Nolting. He was on his way out. I think he had been planning a sort of leisurely trip from there on. He did stop briefly in Tokyo, but I think he was going to stop longer in Tokyo and maybe elsewhere on the way in. But just at that moment the pagoda raids took place, so he then just flew straight in. Now at this point we had martial law in Saigon and a curfew and so forth and did in fact--I don't know, perhaps martial law, maybe just a curfew. But in any case, it was a very excited situation indeed, and his plane came in in the middle of the night from Tokyo and I guess we went out to meet him.

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I must say, I have never seen anybody take over so thoroughly and so well as he did. I was just full of admiration. I have never in all my career seen anybody move into such a complicated, messy situation and take charge so quickly and so effectively. I don't know anything about his later tour out there, but this one was really very remarkable to my recollection.

(Interruption)

G: [You were saying] Ambassador Lodge took charge very thoroughly.

T: Well, he simply hit the ground running. He made decisions and moved ahead, and he had certainly been well briefed and I think knew what he wanted to do and I think he also had full confidence that he was in charge of everything and he was not going to tolerate any sort of suggestion that he was not in charge. I think he also had a real experience and gift for dealing with the press. He never had any trouble with the press from the time he arrived. Of course, he was always carrying out a policy which was of really extreme pressure on the government, which suited the book of the correspondents for the most part. Furthermore, he saw them regularly. He once was a newspaperman himself and he knew that a newspaperman must have a story to write and he helped them write stories. So that problem sort of disappeared. Then he did other things which really made it very clear that he was the man to deal with.

G: Did your duties or position or operation change at all?

T: Not really. He was very good with me throughout and seemed to--from what I've said, I think we were fully in agreement about Diem, for

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example, so that there was no real problem there. I think he put full faith in me. We can talk about my leaving and so on at some point if you want, and how that came about, but it didn't come about, as far as I know, because of any difficulty with Lodge.

He, in general, adopted the view that having made all these courtesy calls and so forth, and having let the government know what we wanted in general, [that is], about the same concessions we've been talking about, that he didn't have any leverage with Diem or rather he didn't get anywhere with Diem by making demands. He just sat back and said, "I'll wait for him to come to me." And that was the policy which he followed right up to the end. There is some suggestion that Diem may have been just about to get the point when the coup took place on the first of November. You're familiar with that?

G: Yes. We're going to come to that. I wanted to ask you about the famous telegram of August 24. Were you privy to that when that came in?

T: Oh, yes. This was not long after he got there, of course. The telegram was clear enough and not too surprising, or certainly not unwelcome to Lodge or to me. What was troublesome was this simultaneous radio broadcast on USIA, on the VOA, which was very upsetting because it in effect disclosed what was in the message. I mean, what the broadcast said was that the United States now knew that the army had not been involved in the pagoda raids. It could be read as an open invitation to the army to take over. There were other things in the message that added to that impression. Well, that wasn't the kind

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of thing you wanted to have happen when you were instructed in this telegram to start making moves covertly which would in effect encourage something like this.

G: You were quite afraid that VOA had tipped your hand then?

T: Well, yes. And worse than that, this all happened on the morning we were all going to go over to the palace to present his credentials. I think I'm not wrong about this. I think it was I who suggested to Lodge that he leave Harkins--not just Harkins but [John] Richardson as well--home. Their presence wasn't required for such a thing. I was certainly sufficiently concerned that these things might lead Diem to hold us or something in the palace. So he did this--this has been reported; I don't think they usually mention that Richardson was also left behind. In fact, of course, nothing like that happened. The fact that there were differences of opinion back here about the clearance of the message, I have no firsthand knowledge of that. In the end, of course, nothing happened as a result of this particular episode. But in the end, it just sort of petered out. The military never felt I guess they had themselves organized well enough to move.

G: Although I think one of them had contacted Conein already.

T: Oh, yes, we had been in touch with them all right. If I'm not mistaken, at this point Harkins also had a meeting with [Tran Thien] Khiem in which this thing was touched on. But in fact nothing happened. I don't know why. I think it's conceivable that the generals were not--if it wasn't that they were not ready to act, maybe they

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were not sure enough that we were really behind this, that this wasn't in some way perhaps a trap. In any case, nothing did come of it.

G: There were two fact-finding missions to Vietnam that fall, two notable ones that I remember.

T: This is after the coup?

G: No, this was between August and the coup, I think September and October. Now, one of them was one that you've alluded to previously. This is the Krulak-Mendenhall mission. Were you involved in the fact-finding and opinion-gathering that went on then?

T: Well, you know, Mendenhall stayed with me while he was in Saigon. We talked and I'm sure I told him everything I knew, what I thought, and he talked to as many people as he could talk to in the time allotted. He had many contacts there, having been in the country for, I don't know, I think he did a three or four-year tour there. He went and talked to people whose opinion he judged, but he didn't--he wrote his own report, I think, on his way home. But from what I know of it, his report would have been very much what I would have reported.

G: Well, I think it was, and I think then General Krulak gave such a contradictory report one wonders who was General Krulak getting his information from.

T: I think he said at the time he'd talked only to the advisers.

G: But if the advisers had been sending or wanting to send discouraging reports, how do we account for that? How do we account for--?

T: Well, they wouldn't tell Krulak. I think on another one of these visits out there, at one point McNamara came. I think this is one of



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the things that Lodge did was to get him aside and talk to him. He had him stay with him. I think this is true. He said, "You can't possibly imagine"--Lodge, after all, was a reserve major general--"You don't know the army, Bob, if you think that these people are going to tell or say in front of Harkins or anybody on Harkins' staff what they really think unless it's what they think Harkins thinks. You just don't know your army." Now, maybe that's unfair to the army--I hope it is--but that was the problem. Plus the fact that I think it's very hard for somebody who's doing something not to tend to think, well, it's working. You naturally feel this way, whatever you do yourself.

G: Were we making a mistake in having the people who were responsible for the program also measure the progress of the program?

T: Well, yes, always to some degree, sure. But this kind of visit, you know, I think that so much of this was just wheel-spinning anyway. I mean, when you couldn't make up your mind what to do, you'd always send another team out to Vietnam to talk to the same people, ask the same questions, and go back.

G: Have you read the account of Krulak and Mendenhall reporting to President Kennedy?

T: Oh, yes, I've read about it and his asking "Were you two gentlemen in the same country?" and so on. Of course, I can't remember, I think Mecklin was back on this same trip, wasn't he, and maybe Rufus Phillips.

G: I think that was--

T: Was that a little later on?

G: They brought them back I think, yes, to report.

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T: I think they brought back people to report. Anyway, that's about all I know on that.

G: Were you aware of what Mecklin and Phillips were going to say when they got back?

T: No, no, I wasn't. But I could guess. Mecklin I think reported that he recommended we be prepared to send in the marines or something, or send in troops. I don't think I knew he felt that. But I knew very well what Phillips thought was happening.

G: And of course he'd be talking about the same countryside that General Krulak had been talking about.

T: Sure. And I think he probably said that these people would not tell Krulak what was really going on. I'm not sure, too, whether Krulak didn't spend more time in the north than in the Delta where the situation was, we thought, the worst.

G: All this time, of course, we know now that the Vietnamese generals were gradually getting their act together to do the deed. Were we able to stay abreast of that in any way or only at intervals?

T: Well, we were very close to the generals through particularly Conein but also through a guy named Speera and--

G: How do you spell that?

T: Al Speera, S-P-E-E-R-A. He was also with the agency. And of course one or two of them were close friends of Rufus Phillips, Le Van Kim for example. And of course people like Dick Stilwell were close to them, too, but just to what degree he would ever go outside the military sort of a discussion, I'm not sure. But of course Dick

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certainly knew all about what was going on in this area and what reports we were getting.

G: Doesn't this put you in a rather delicate position here, to be aware of a coup, or the possibility of a coup, and at the same time supposed to be maintaining relations with Diem? It seems to me that questions of loyalty and ethics become very difficult to deal with about what is your duty in a situation like this.

T: Well, I think so. I think there's no doubt about that and I have not only a lot of questions nowadays about the basic ethics of it, so to speak, as I do about the efficacy of it. My general judgment, not just on Vietnam but I've had lots of experience in this area, having been involved with State Department approval of covert operations in a very broad way, I'm inclined to think that over time these operations have cost this country far more than we have ever achieved from them. But I think in this case and by this time, the kind of concerns you mentioned were greatly offset by the feeling that we had been had by these people. So that I think we felt we had maybe a broader commitment than to Diem, we had a commitment in effect to the Vietnamese people obviously, and to do anything to perpetuate this Diem regime was not in the interests of Vietnam or the United States.

Of course once we had listened to these generals, then we had a commitment to them in the sense that--well, I think at one point the question was raised. I think Lodge said we couldn't stop this thing; it had gone beyond the point where it could be stopped. Washington

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didn't want to accept this. Basically the only way to have stopped it might have been to tell Diem and that could perhaps have stopped it, but it would have been to undermine any possibilities.

G: Where did John Richardson, what was his position in the middle of all this?

T: Well, first of all, I think Richardson, to begin with, was inclined to support Diem and Nhu, and he had closed a definite deal with Nhu. I mean, over the years the CIA station chief had had a regular meeting with Nhu. Colby had them and Richardson had them, and they reported fully to us as well as to Washington on what was transpiring at these meetings. The agency also supported, in a technical way and financially, these special forces of Nhu's. Now, I think that long before we got to the final chapter of this thing, Richardson had concluded that there was no real turning back and we had to go through with the support of a coup. The reason he was removed, and I don't know this by Lodge's having told me in so many words, but I think the reason Richardson was removed was simply to make it very clear really to Diem and Nhu as well as, maybe even more importantly, to the military, that Lodge was speaking for the government. This close relationship between the chief of station and Nhu, which was sanctioned and had a long history, was bound to lead people on the Vietnamese side to wonder if we had two policies out there. I'm sure a lot of Americans may have felt the same thing. I don't; I'm confident that Richardson was an absolutely 200 per cent loyal follower of policy and was not double-crossing anybody. I don't believe Lodge thought he was. But I

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think Lodge did it for this reason: this was a clear signal, the only kind of really believable signal he could give. But this, as I say, is conjecture; Lodge never told me this.

G: The press, of course, conjectured that Richardson was sent home because there was a disagreement over policy toward Diem.

T: I don't believe that's the case. There may have been at one time, but Richardson was not only a man who carried out his instructions, but I think if he--he might well have thought to handle it differently, but by the time he was sent home he was not arguing we should be doing something different, and his own people were the key players in the whole affair.

G: Right. Right. Did you have any indication to back up the rumor that Nhu, or maybe Diem, was in touch with the other side during the fall?

T: No, and I really think that was a lot of horseshit, frankly. Correct that in the transcript.

G: (Laughter) We'll let you remake that one.

T: No, I never took that seriously. I am doubtful that he would try, but I don't think the VC would have given him the time of day.

G: Shall we just ascribe that to the Saigon rumor mill then?

T: Well, no, I think it's very likely something he would put out, you know.

G: Disinformation.

T: Yes, or something. Like demanding withdrawal of Americans and this kind of thing. It's a--

G: A bluff, perhaps?

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T: Well, you know, we had this other famous meeting, which I was present at, not very long before the coup, and he was sounding off about how weak his brother was and so forth. I think he was quite ready to confuse people, do anything, say anything.

G: Let's talk about the coup. Of course it's been widely written about and so on, but I was wondering if you had any special personal recollections that you would like to get into the record here.

T: One thing, I went to the Philippines for about eight days, I think, just before the coup for a physical and a little bit of R&R and got back two or three days before the coup. And there were a number of things that went on in those days between the mission and the generals and so on that I've only--I wasn't around when they were going on. In general I think I was kept cut in on everything that was happening and did a lot of the intermediary work myself.

But as far as the coup is concerned, my recollection is that we were sort of expecting something, but I remember going home for lunch, as we did every day. My driver dropped me off and went on to have lunch himself, and he lived near the police station, I think it was. Instead of having lunch, he came straight back and said that the army or soldiers were taking over the police station. Well, it was clear to me what this meant, so I then didn't finish my lunch and went over to Lodge's house, which was a half a block away. He was having lunch. And I told him it would seem to me the coup had started. No other explanation for it. He was slightly skeptical. I said I thought I'd

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go on back to the office. We had at that time very good communications between the residence and the chancery. I suggested maybe the best thing to do would be for him to stay there and I would go to the embassy and we'd keep in touch on the phone, or if one of us got cut off, the other one could--and he did and that's what happened.

So I went to the office and we then set up a system of reporting. By this time there were a lot of other reports of the same kind. And we set up a system of sending single channel messages. We actually used the CIA communications channel, but they were all distributed throughout Washington, one series of flash messages. [There was] only one break as I recall in the whole time; the air attache sent a message about he'd gotten a report from somebody that a division sympathetic to Diem was moving up from somewhere. I think it was an erroneous report, but he sent it through his channel and it created sort of a flurry back here. But otherwise we had I thought a very good thing. This went on for twenty-four hours practically, because the coup wasn't over until noon the next day.

At some point in the afternoon Diem called, or somebody was calling for Diem, to speak to Lodge. I referred them and gave them the number of the residence, and he [Lodge] talked to them. And that message, that conversation, has been--where after talking to him, he telephoned to me and dictated the telegram of what he had said to him.

Of course, there was a lot of shooting during the coup and some bombing. A lot of the trajectories, a lot of the artillery was right over the chancery into the palace yard, which was a sound I was not

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unfamiliar with, but I was pretty sure they weren't shooting at us.

(Laughter) Someone said during that--and this has been reported, too-- particularly when they finally brought some infantry up to move into the palace grounds, "I wish they would fight like this against the VC."

(Laughter)

Of course, we were very lucky as a mission there because we had people scattered all over the city. My own wife was at home with the baby, and the other son happened to be at a friend's house and he stayed there. We had lots of discussions about whether we ought to try to assemble people or move them to a safe place, and in the end we didn't do anything because we didn't think we could improve on their safety. But I daresay if anybody had been hurt we would have been blamed for it.

As I say, my recollection was about that except that of course after the coup was over, you asked in your questionnaire what was the reaction. Well, the reaction was just Mardi Gras practically, tremendous excitement and a celebration in the streets, people marching around, the usual--as quite often that happens. But there was great jubilation amongst the people. Whether they knew that Nhu and Diem had been killed, I don't know.

G: Could Lodge have been elected president of Vietnam? He said he could have been elected that day if he had run for office.

T: Well, I think in Saigon, yes.



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G: How did you react to the news of the assassinations of the two brothers?

T: Well, I was sorry to hear it, but I wasn't awfully shocked and I certainly wasn't too surprised.

G: Was that because this is a relatively common ending for a coup?

T: No, I mean I think we had always thought, and I think maybe reported long before, that it would be a very likely concomitant of a coup in Vietnam, particularly because of what had happened in 1960 when the coup had half succeeded. [If Diem and Nhu were killed] then they wouldn't be able to rally other forces and so on. And I think these people would have all feared that even if they got out of the country or something, that they would be a threat. So I think we were asked at one time what we thought would--I guess it was long before there was any idea of any involvement of the U.S.--but in the event of a coup, what would be the fate of [Diem and Nhu]. I think we said that we thought that it would have to be considered a very strong possibility that they would be killed just for the reasons I've just given.

G: There were some reports that President Kennedy was shocked.

T: Well, I dare say he was, but I don't know. I'm sure that everybody had different feelings about it.

G: Who did it, do you think?

T: I don't [know]. I've read all these things that you've read. I don't have any knowledge of them. I suppose one of those people who were on the APC did it, but whether he did it under orders, I just don't know. I think Conein thinks that--he's been told various things and he's

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reported them--you've probably seen him--but I have never had any independent information about it.

G: Did we have any way of knowing what effect the coup would have on the conduct of the war and the insurgency and conditions in the countryside? Was there any way to prognosticate that?

T: Well, I didn't know of any. It was more that you could figure they couldn't get any worse. Or maybe that they were not likely to get any worse. I certainly didn't have--there was nobody out there that you had great faith would be a better administrator or anything like that. You did have the feeling that, by this time at any rate, the Ngo family had really only one objective, [that] is to stay in power.

G: Now, the picture that I have been able to form between the time of the coup and the time of the next coup, if you will, is rather confused. It's very hard to tell what's going on from this end. Was it pretty much that way in Saigon, too, when the new regime is attempting to take the reins?

T: You mean after the coup? After the afterthrow of Diem?

G: Right. Right. When Minh and his crew came in.

T: I'm not sure what they were doing, but I think they were trying to get organized to do something. But I don't think, first of all, that they had ever had any faith in the strategic hamlet program.

G: Why do you say that?

T: Well, because at least during the few months that remained while I was there, I don't think they tried to pick it up or carry it forward. After all, they were military people, and the military had never been

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very much involved with this program, and I don't believe they were convinced that it was a--I think they thought it was some toy of Nhu's. And I think also they were very reluctant even to use that name for it, if it was going to be continued, because the name was associated, they thought, in the minds of the people with Diem and Nhu.

So I don't think they had any particular strategic conception of how to deal with the problem of the VC. I remember one of the things they wanted to do was a reconciliation with the Cao Dai, for example. I remember going down on a trip, all the way in a Vietnamese helicopter, from Saigon to whatever the capital of that province was. There was a big welcoming ceremony by the local Cao Dai, and they considered this a big political step, reconciliation of the government with the Cao Dai. They were saying in effect that the Cao Dai can really control this province and there won't be any problem with the VC because of this. So I don't think they had any central conception of what to do about the problem, but I think they certainly weren't ready to pick up and carry forward with the program that we had thought was central to the whole thing.

Bear in mind, I'm talking about--I was there in November, December, and I left in January, so I don't--and then they had a coup at the end of January or something. So it's a confused picture to me, too, but I think in general it was a confused situation. Also I think they were trying to sort out how they were going to organize the government and who was going to do what to whom and so on.

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G: Now, in the middle of this, in December, Secretary McNamara came back--

T: Yes.

G: --obviously trying to figure out what is going on in fact, is that it?

T: Well, I guess. I have an idea that he came out also to talk, at that point, about maybe some actions against the North, bombing or something. I may be mistaken about this but I seem to recall that this was at least one of the subjects discussed. My recollection is that at one point I expressed the opinion I thought that we might be more vulnerable to this in a way than the North was because I was thinking about our oil supply dumps and whatnot, which I thought might be very vulnerable to VC action and that sort of thing, and that before we moved up we ought to be pretty sure we could protect ourselves. Bear in mind, we had nothing but advisers in Vietnam at this time and I'm sure our own supply lines and so on were much more vulnerable and limited than they later became. But it's just my rather vague recollection of how this brief exchange with McNamara leads me to believe that this topic came up during that visit. It certainly would have been the last chance I ever had to say anything to him on that subject.

But by that time I was really packing up to go. You asked that question, let me fill that in and make sure you get it. What had happened was that sometime in the fall at about the time that Lodge arrived or a little after Lodge arrived, I had a letter from Hilsman asking me if I would come back to Washington and be the officer in

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charge of Vietnam affairs, or the deputy assistant secretary for Vietnam, in his office. I had had my two years there and it would have been normal tour, and I asked Lodge and he said, "If you want to, if it's a step up, why, yes, I'll agree to it," and we then talked about who might replace me. In fact, I helped him pick out somebody that he asked to come, David Nes.

But of course this all was laid on before the coup and before the assassination of Kennedy. I think it's clear that Johnson had opposed, to what degree I don't know, the whole business of unseating Diem and so forth. I think he was, and I think the military were clearly anxious to see me out of there. So that I believe while the thing developed in the way I said, I think by the time I left there were various people who were keen for me to go sooner rather than later. Lodge wanted to take a brief holiday up in Hong Kong and didn't want me to leave until after he had had that and came back. This was agreed to but it meant my staying on for another two or three weeks. Anyway, by the time I got back to Washington they had reorganized the State Department in such a way that I took over not Vietnam, but Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma. What I used to say [was that] I got the dominoes. But I never had anything to do with Vietnam except in an indirect way in trying to avoid encroachments into Cambodia or Laos, or whatever, after I came back.

G: It's alleged that that was done on purpose, that--

T: As I say, I assume it was done on purpose. Are you saying I'm--?

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G: No, no, that they took Vietnam out of the Southeast Asia thing because you were taking over Southeast Asia.

T: Oh, yes, I assumed that.

G: Oh, I see, all right.

T: I'm sure they did, although you could make out a case that it had become such a busy job that it would make sense to leave it in one, but they could have put me in charge of the Vietnam task force rather than [the rest of Southeast Asia]. No, I think it was very clear what they were trying to do. I never was under any misapprehensions about that.

G: I see. Were you able to brief your successor, David Nes?

T: Yes, because he came out--actually, now that you mention it, he came out with McNamara on that December trip. I think David was then--was he in Paris? In any case, McNamara I think maybe had flown out from Europe. Anyway, David got on that plane and he came with him. So, yes, I was able to brief him and he was able to see the house and things like this and we made all sorts of arrangements about his sending my dog back and getting my--I brought back my number-one boy and so on. So, yes, I was able [to brief him], but he did not hit it off with Lodge and only lasted about six months, I think. Of course, Lodge himself came back for the campaign in the next year.

G: What happened to Nes? I haven't been able to find his tracks.

T: He lives in Baltimore. He later went to Cairo as number two. He was there when the embassy was evacuated. He was quoted by a newspaperman, I've forgotten now exactly what he said, but it was something

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rather contrary to policy, and he left the service not long after. He was very unhappy about our Middle Eastern policy. That's more of his area, incidentally, than again the Southeast Asia business. But Lodge had met him once when he was in the United Nations and I knew Nes.

G: The conventional wisdom, if you will, is that Nes tried to do too much and that Lodge didn't want an activist deputy chief of mission.

T: Well, I've heard something of the same thing. I think perhaps that there were people in Washington who thought that somebody needed to keep an eye on Lodge. Nes may have had some sort of a hidden brief and this would be certainly--if Lodge even thought something like this he would--

G: Somebody in the White House thought this, perhaps, that--?

T: Or somewhere, I don't know. But in any case, Nes had an introduction to the job which was unprecedented; he had a laying on of hands at the White House from LBJ. You might want to talk to Nes. I can tell you how to get hold of him. But in any case, I have heard that, for example, the committee, the so-called Trueheart Committee, which is what they used to call it, I believe he was never allowed to have such a committee. There may have been other problems, but I don't know what they are. I dare say he'd be glad to talk to you.

Have we covered our thing?

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I

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APR 19 1985